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Talent and the Renewed Mind

Romans 12:1-8

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Last week we talked about the parable of talents from Matthew 25, and we learned that a talent, as it is described in the New Testament, is really a form of currency. It was basically a block of something like silver, usually about 60 to 80 pounds.

But it's interesting to think about that word 'talent' because the Greek word *talanton* is still the word from which we get our English word talent. It literally means to weight. So when you think about talent and the roots of our English word, it's with the idea that we are weighted in a certain direction, that everybody is predisposed or weighted in certain directions. So if you put that together with the idea that there is a God who has created us and this is the same God who has called us, it would make sense that that God has weighted us in a certain direction that we might fulfill our calling.

With all of that in mind, it raises a question: How many people do you suppose out in the marketplace on a weekly basis function in their area of talent? The answer would be about 30 percent, which is really a staggering number. According to studies, whatever the organization, whether it's healthcare, whether it's out in the marketplace, in education, for example, only about 30 percent of the people actually function in the area of their talent. This means 70 percent of people function on a daily basis with a huge chunk of their lives in an area where they're either have low talent or no talent.

I want to raise the question this morning: How is that good stewardship? And I will raise the question: Do we think that's what God intended? Why is that? There are people much more qualified than me to talk about all the issues out in the marketplace, but I do think at the core of what's happening there is a theological explanation. I think it reflects a value system that defines the world in which we live.

If you go all the way back in your mind to Genesis chapter 2, we remember that Adam and Eve were perfectly related to God. And because they were perfectly related to God, their sense of worth, their significance, their meaning, their purpose—all of that flowed out of their relationship with God. And out of that they did the work that God called them to do in the Garden.

But in Genesis chapter 3 when Adam and Eve sinned against God, they were cut off from their relationship with God. So once they were cut off from their source of worth, their source of meaning and purpose, they were left to try to somehow find for themselves that which would give them value and meaning and purpose. So in essence, once they were cut off from God, they had to become their own gods. And, as their own gods, their source of worth was determined by their ability to perform.

But you can only assess performance on the basis of how it compares with someone else's performance. So the world's system is a performance-driven system that, in essence, is driven on the basis of competition and comparison. In other words, the way that I assess my self-worth is often on the basis of my net worth. The way I determine my self-worth is on the basis of how I think I compare with someone else based on our competition. If I perform favorably, I think better about myself. If I perform poorly, then I think lowly of myself. And that in essence defines the world's system.

Take that out into the marketplace and we're reminded that people by and large are not pursuing a calling. They're not pursuing a passion. They're not getting up every morning saying, "This is what God has wired me to do." They're pursuing their self-esteem through performance, through titles, through paychecks. So the world's system is really not about a sense of wiring and passion. It's about what title, what role, what paycheck will somehow make me feel better about myself, will raise my sense of esteem. And I think at the core that's how we get into this mess.

You know, thousands of students at the University of Nebraska are pursuing careers they really aren't passionate about. Frankly, they aren't even terribly interested in them. What they're pursuing is a title. What they're pursuing is a certain role that will produce a certain amount of money that they're convinced will somehow make them feel like they're somebody. And that's why thousands and thousands of students never really stay in the career they pursued in college. It's not really where their heart is. It's not really where their passion is. And they find out it's empty. And they go on to pursue something else.

The question we want to talk about today is: Is there a better way? Does it have to be like that, or is there a better way? If you have a Bible, turn with me to Romans 12. Most people are familiar with the first two verses of Romans 12; however, I would suggest that people are not familiar with the context of these verses in Romans 12. Romans 12:1:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2; *NASB)

I want to just walk through those two verses and unpack the terminology and get some sense of what Paul is saying here. It begins with the word 'therefore', and of course we have the adage, "Whenever you see the word 'therefore' stop and see what it's there for," because it's always a reference to something that has preceded it.

If you review the book of Romans, the 'therefore's track all the way back to chapter 1. And in essence, what Paul is saying is over the last eleven chapters he's made the case for salvation by grace through faith. And if we have understood what he has said, he has said there is no amount of religious performance, there's nothing that we can do that somehow impresses God or merits God's favor, but rather, we have to recognize that I have to trust in what Jesus has done for me on the cross of Calvary and embrace that, believe that Jesus died for my sins, believe that by faith and simply receive it as a gift. That's grace. Therefore I died to this thought that somehow my performance is the basis of my esteem or my performance is the basis of my significance and my self-worth. I realize now that on the basis of God's grace, I find my self-worth. I find my significance. I find my meaning. I find my purpose by being rightly related to God. And it's out of that that flows how I live my life, going back to the understanding of the way it was in Genesis 2.

Because I now understand that and believe it, "**Therefore,**" he discusses the implications of that in chapter 12. "**Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God,** [by the grace of God, by what you now understand to be true about grace] **to present your bodies...**"

Why 'bodies?' I think primarily because as we read on in the text, the emphasis in this text is about what we do. And what we do is what we do with our bodies. So it's just a simple way of saying that

we need to, as a result of what we now believe to be true, be mindful of what we do and why we do it. **“Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God.”** The word ‘acceptable’ means well-pleasing. Acceptable is maybe not a strong enough word. **“...[well-pleasing] to God, which is your spiritual service of worship...”**

I think the phrase **“spiritual service of worship”** is a little bit confusing. The King James version says “a reasonable service of worship.” I think that’s a lot better. The Greek word actually means that which is reasonable, that which is rational, or that which is logical. In other words, what he is saying is based on what we now believe from chapters 1 through 11, there needs to be a reasonable response to that that affects what we do.

Verse 2: **“And do not be conformed to this world...”** That word ‘conformed’ means to be squeezed into a mold. “[Don’t be squeezed into the mold of the world. Don’t be squeezed into the world’s thinking], **but be transformed.**” That’s a very powerful word. It’s the Greek word from which we get our word ‘metamorphosis.’ Do not be conformed to this world but be metamorphosed. Be radically changed, completely changed. How? **“By the renewing of your mind,”** in simple terms, by thinking differently.

Based on what we know to be true, chapters 1 through 11, about this wonderful thing called grace, realizing again that our value and significance and meaning in life comes from being rightly related to God, there’s a rational or reasonable response to that. And it affects what we do. So we’re trying to avoid being squeezed into the value system of the world, but we are being completely metamorphosed by a whole new way of thinking

What’s the result of that? **“That you may prove [or demonstrate or reveal] what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”** What he’s saying there is that in choosing to do that – to think differently in what we do and why we do it – we will actually demonstrate that. In other words, that God’s way is better, that God’s way is good, and it’s well-pleasing, and it’s perfect.

So to understand verses 1 and 2, what Paul is saying is based on what we believe to be true in chapters 1 through 11. There is a reasonable, rational response to that to choose not to go the world’s way, but to be completely changed to a whole new way of thinking about what we do and why we do it. And if we choose to live that way, people will see that God’s way is a better way because it’s good, it’s pleasing and it’s perfect.

Most people stop with verse 2 and don’t understand there is a context that defines exactly what he means. I’ve heard many a sermon talk about what it means to have a renewed mind, and what it means to not be conformed, and what it means to be transformed, but without any real consideration of the context. Paul has something very specific in mind here. So let’s look. Verse 3:

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. (v. 3)

Now do you think it’s possible that since in verse 2 he talked about renewing your mind, which is a new way of thinking, that perhaps in verse 3 he’s defining what that thinking is since he uses the word *think* three times? It’s kind of hard to miss, isn’t it? **“For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to *think* more highly of himself than he ought to *think*, but to *think* so as to have sound judgment...”**

To be conformed to the world is to think more highly of yourself than you ought to think. And what is the basis of that? The basis is this performance-driven system that causes me to compete and compare with everyone else. And the only way I can feel good about myself is to believe somehow, in my comparison with someone else, I'm better. Therefore, that seems to prop up my sagging self-esteem, but in essence I'm thinking of myself more highly than someone else. And that's what it means to be conformed to the world.

But Paul is saying actually we should think differently than that. We should have sound judgment. It's a strong phrase right there. It's sometimes translated 'sober judgment.' The Greek word literally means 'sane thinking.' So let's back it up. To believe when we believe about the realities of grace and to turn around and think then somehow we can think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think is insanity because of what we now know to be true about what we have received by grace. Verse 4:

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly. (vs. 4-6a)

Okay, now what he is saying is this: Let's use the human body as a metaphor. The human body has different members, different parts, and different roles. You have fingers, you have toes, you have eyes, you have ears; and all of those different parts have a different function, but they all come together to form one body in order to accomplish the purpose. He is saying that is a picture, that's a metaphor of the reality of the body of Christ, that all of us have a different calling. We're weighted differently. God has made some eyes and some toes and some feet in order that we might all come together and function together in order to accomplish the mission. **"So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given us..."** That's a key sentence.

When you hear the term 'gifts,' or often referred to as 'spiritual gifts,' you may have quite a little baggage that goes with that terminology. I'm going to invite you this morning just to hit the delete button and start from scratch and redefine the terminology, because I think we've often misunderstood it.

The word 'gift' is not a reference to some magical ability that we suddenly get at the moment of salvation. It's actually a form of the word 'grace.' And it's really not so much a reference to specifically what we *do*. It's a reference to the fact that we have a calling, that we have a role in the body. The fact that I'm even a functioning member of God's body invited to be a part of something that will last forever is something I did not earn, I did not deserve, I did not have coming. It's purely a gift of God's grace. As a matter of fact, he says it twice so we don't miss that part of it. **"...Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us."** In other words, we are the recipients of God's grace. That's the basis by which we are called to be a part of the body. And again, it is a result of God's grace. Therefore, we should all just focus on seeking to be faithful to our calling, not to be driven by this performance mentality where we are competing and comparing and thinking of ourselves as more highly than we ought to think.

He goes on and gives us a list of various roles or various callings. Now I don't think this list is meant to be a list where we work out definitions and try and figure out which one is ours. I think he's simply giving us a sampling. He says:

...if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (vs. 6b-8)

Now that's an interesting list when you think about it. If you think about the fact that God has weighted people in a certain direction in order to fulfill a calling, some of those seem rather obvious. If we were to call them talents, we would say, "Well, I understand teaching is a talent and leading is a talent. And there are people who are predisposed that way to carry that out. But what we often don't think about in that category are things like serving, things like giving, things like mercy."

Now I understand we're all supposed to be giving. We're all supposed to be merciful. We're all supposed to be serving. But clearly the text is saying there are those people who have been called to a very specific role of mercy, a role of giving, or a role of serving. We are weighted in that direction. That's the way God has made us. It's the way God has wired us.

If you take the whole concept and put it together, we recognize this is really quite a challenge because it runs so contrary to the value system of this world. In essence, what Paul is saying is based on what we believe over the first eleven chapters of Romans, the only reasonable response would be to recognize that each one of us, on the basis of God's grace, has a calling. We didn't earn it, we didn't deserve it. We're simply the recipient of it. Therefore, I understand that my significance, my self-worth, my meaning, my purpose come from being rightly related to God and not how my role compares to anyone else's role. But I simply realize God has called me to be faithful to steward what He's given me, to steward the role He's called me to without thinking of myself more highly than anyone else.

We understand it in theory, but we also understand that when you have some roles that are under the lights and some roles that are behind the scenes, it's really hard to keep this in mind. In essence, what Paul is saying is I have no foundation to believe that I am any more important to God or the ministry of this church than anyone who has been called to serve in the nursery. The only difference is God called me to preach and Gloria to serve in the nursery. Neither of us deserved it. Neither of us had it coming. I didn't control my wiring. That's all a gift from God. And all God requires is that we find our worth and value in Him and are faithful to steward our calling.

But that's a challenge, isn't it? It would be easy to begin to think that because people like the Hitch's or Mike or me—people that are more visible, that tend to be on the stage, have a higher level of status, are certainly much more important than simply someone who serves in the nursery because that is the value system of the world. And that is where we have to reject that and say, "But that isn't God's value system. And this is a whole different way of looking at what I do. If I start believing I am more important than anyone else based on what I believe about grace, I have gone insane." That's a pretty literal explanation of the text.

Think of it this way. Let's imagine this morning that I invite four volunteers to come down here this morning and just stand here and that I'm really quite a wealthy person. And over at Southpointe today they are collecting money for a very worthy cause. And so I want to give a sum of money to each of these four people to take over there and simply deliver it to the people collecting the money. So to the first person I give a hundred dollars. To the second person I give a thousand dollars. To the third person I give ten thousand dollars, and to the fourth person I give a hundred thousand dollars.

Now all of us understand together that the hundred-dollar person has no basis to think he or she is more valuable than the hundred-thousand-dollar person. The only difference is I gave you a different size check, and that's my choice. All I'm asking is that you equally be faithful to take it over and deliver it. So if the hundred-thousand-dollar person walks out that door somehow thinking more highly of himself than he ought to think, we would call him on it, and say, "Hey, what do you think you're doing? You didn't have anything to do with that! You're just the delivery boy. Don't forget that."

Okay, we got it. We understand it. Everything's good. The problem is what happens when they get to Southpointe because what happens is the hundred-dollar person arrives at Southpointe and delivers the money, and they say, "Thank you very much." The thousand-dollar person delivers the check, and they say, "Thank you very much, very generous. Now what is your name again?" The ten-thousand-dollar person delivers the goods, and they say, "That is so incredibly generous! Thank you so much! You are wonderful! I cannot believe that you are so generous!" And then the hundred-thousand-dollar person gets over there, and they say, "Wow, this is amazing! Call the television studio! We're going to name a brick after you! You are amazing!"

And this is what happens. The world starts messing with our heads because that is the value system of the world. And pretty soon that hundred-thousand-dollar person starts believing what he's hearing and starts to think that's true, *I am somebody*. He starts to like those television cameras and starts to admire his brick. And somewhere along the way he lost sight of the fact that the only difference between himself and the hundred-dollar person is the size of the gift I chose to give him. To somehow take that and think he is more important than anyone else is absolutely insane. As a matter of fact, it is totally inconsistent with what we say we believe.

That's the essence of what Paul is saying. It's a whole different value system. Do I want you to appreciate and affirm my calling? Yes, I do. I want you to appreciate and affirm my calling exactly the same way you would appreciate and affirm the calling of those people that serve in the nursery. No more, no less. Just appreciate one another for the callings, for the roles, for the giftedness that God has given us that we can come together and accomplish the purpose.

I think we tend to understand this fairly well in a ministry environment. What happens when we leave this campus? Well, we talk a lot about the fact that our calling isn't limited to what happens on this campus. It's a calling to what we do every day. It's a calling to the marketplace. It's a calling to the educational system. It's a calling to healthcare. It's a calling to be a homemaker. And if that's true, then why wouldn't this same thinking be just as relevant to that calling? Why would we limit it to what happens on this campus? That opens up a whole new door to begin to consider.

What would happen if in my everyday life I truly believed that my significance, my self-worth, my meaning, my purpose comes from being rightly related to God? And it's not based on my paycheck; it's not based on my position; it's not based on my title; it's not based on my career choice. But rather, I would be set free from all of that to pursue a calling, to pursue a passion that God has put in my heart where I could move beyond living for weekends and 65 and get up every morning and be excited about what God has called me to be about.

I mean stop and think of the implications if God's value system were to take hold. What if you worked in a place where that organization valued the CEO and the janitor equally because both were wired to do what they do? Both are pros at what they do, and there was really a culture that was able to say, "You're just as valuable to this organization as this person."

What if it was really possible that parents were able to be equally proud of their children when one is a construction worker and one is a heart surgeon? And in all honesty be able to say, "I'm just as proud of both of them because this is what God has called them to and this is how God has wired them?" What if students coming through school were counseled by the counselors at school not to pursue careers that would make them the most money, that would give them the most status and title, but to really understand that kids' wiring and what God has called them to—or at least an understanding of what they're passionate about—that they might from the beginning pursue those things that really matter? It'd be a different world, wouldn't it?

Our desire would be to see that happen across our city. There's no reason why that couldn't happen. And it's our job to work on that. What I would say to you this morning though is you have to own your responsibility to wisely steward what God has given you. We have got to do better than living for weekends and 65, getting up every morning and just surviving. That is a huge chunk of your life. And if it's true that every person has a calling and every person has been predisposed, every person has been weighted a certain direction to fulfill that calling, wouldn't God want us to do everything in our power to wisely steward what He's given to us in order to accomplish that calling?

For some of you it might mean some very hard decisions. If some of you were to be honest, you chose your career because of a certain title, because of a certain position, because of a certain paycheck. But if you were to be honest in your heart of hearts, you're kind of surviving for the weekends and for 65. But what if you were able to get to Friday of every week, and say, "This was another awesome week. I can't wait until Monday because this is what God has called me to do. This is how God has wired me. This is where I belong."

You know, we have somebody that's being called to go to Kenya, and we bring them up on stage, and we understand that they give up a significant amount of lifestyle luxuries in order to make that happen. And we applaud that and we say "Praise Jesus!" But why is it that we are not willing to embrace that same thinking to fulfill our calling right here at home? To be willing to let go of a lot of the stuff that defines the value system of this world in order to pursue that which we are passionate about, that which God has called us to, that which God has wired us up for? It may mean a dramatic change in lifestyle, but at the end of the day we would say, "This is what God has made me to do." And rather than wasting a huge chunk of our lives, we would know that we have wisely stewarded what God has given us.

Let me ask you this question: Someday when you stand before God and you say to God, "You know, I really understand that I wasn't a good steward, but my boss didn't get this concept," do you think God's going to say, "That's okay"? That's where I'm saying you have got to own this thing. Chances are neither your boss nor your organization are going to embrace this. But you are the one who is accountable. You are the one who has to answer. And my encouragement would be to do whatever you have to do to believe you are fulfilling your calling and that you are in a place where God wants you, so that you get up in the morning and you are excited because this is what you are wired for. And on Friday you say, "This was a great week! I can't wait for Monday!" And then we're moving beyond just surviving for weekends and 65.

If we choose to do that, according to the text, people will watch us and they will say, "Hey, I think God's way is better because it's good and it's pleasing and it's perfect." And with that witness we could change a community. That's our challenge, that's our calling together.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that You are a God who has saved us by grace. You have called us by grace. Lord, the only basis by which we even can say we have a calling is to acknowledge that our calling is a gift, and our responsibility is to wisely steward that gift. Lord, it is so easy to get caught up in the value system of this world, find ourselves driven by performance, comparing and competing, but at the end of the day finding ourselves very unfulfilled. Lord, I'm sure there are people here this morning that would need to make significant changes to shift from the value system of this world and to embrace their calling. Lord, I pray that You by Your Spirit would lead accordingly. Lord, that we would all remember not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, but simply to be faithful to that which You've called us to. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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