

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

Dr. George O. Wood

We'll have parallel readings from the Scripture today, Romans 12:8 and Luke 10:30–37. It doesn't seem possible to me that we have been in the first 8 verses of Romans 12 since September. There are a lot of things I want to accomplish today. I want to finish Romans 12:8, the gift of mercy, and sort of tie some things together in this whole series as well because next Sunday I want to preach a Christmas message. Then we'll come back to Romans 12:9 at the beginning of the New Year.

The last phrase of Romans 12:8: "...if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully" (NIV). Then Luke 10:30–37: "In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him'" (NIV).

We've been looking at these seven gifts from Romans 12:6–8 as motivational gifts. There's a whole backdrop of Romans before we can get into describing how we function as a Body.

Romans 1 through 11 laid a foundation for our salvation, for our standing, for our position in Christ. Romans 12, which begins that practical session of Paul's epistle to the Romans, speaks to

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

us individually as dedicating ourselves, presenting ourselves to the Lord as a living sacrifice.

When that standing in Christ is secure through salvation, and when that dedication of life to Jesus as Lord has been made, then we're in a position to begin talking about our relationship to one another and how we build up and bless one another in Christ's family.

When we use the term "motivational gifts" to describe what is in verses 6–8, we're talking about explaining why certain persons in Christ's body behave in certain ways as they respond to concrete needs. What motivates a person to act in this particular manner?

I think the illustration which we used at the outset of this particular series needs repeating in regards to coming at this matter of motivational gifts. The illustration which I used was suppose a family was sitting around a table at dinner, a rather large family, and one of the children accidentally spills his dessert on the floor. Say, chocolate pudding, just to get a good, messy illustration.

The prophet in the family will say something like, "That's what happens when you're not careful." Their motivation is to instantly reach out to attempt to correct, to distinguish between right and wrong and impart some word for the occasion.

The servant who is sitting at the table would say something to the effect: "Let me help you clean that up." Their motivation is to render practical assistance and fulfill a need.

The teacher is sitting at the table, scratching their head, going over the reason as to why it fell, so as to learn, that they might impart wisdom so it does not happen again. They come to the conclusion that one side of the dessert was loaded more heavily than the other side, and that's why it fell. There is a lesson to be learned. That is the motivation of a teacher.

An exhorter is sitting there saying, "Let's try to do better in the future. You're not that clumsy."

An exhorter's motivation is to inspire, to encourage.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

The contributor is sitting at the table. They're concerned about now, the fact is, the dessert is gone, and what is the person going to do? They say, "I'll be happy to buy you a new dessert or replace it with mine." Their motivation is to meet a tangible need.

The mercy person is sitting at the table saying, "Don't feel badly. That could happen to anybody. It's even happened to me." Their motivation is to empathize, to feel, to help the person avoid embarrassment. The mercy person is keenly aware of feelings.

The leader—the gift of giving aid, or the facilitative gift of leadership—is sitting there, and they recognize that there is now a need for organization. So it's, "Jim, you get the mop. Sue, you scoop up the pudding. Mary, wipe the table. Bill, help me fix another dessert." They've got everybody mobilized now to take care of this need.

Your family may not function that cleanly, and there is an awful lot of overlapping between these gifts. We haven't been saying that you just have one thing, and that's what you do. Because throughout this whole series we've been saying that at certain times we all relate in these seven ways. But as you look at your life according to the principles which Paul has given in verses 3,4, and 5, you're to—with sober judgment—analyze the measure of faith, the measure of grace that's been given you and ask yourself, "In what area do I especially seem to stand out?"

Impulsively, what do I seem to reach for? If you look at that and soberly analyze yourself and watch how you function in the Body, you begin to discover what your gift is to other persons. You may be more than a one-gifted person.

Today, we come to the gift of mercy. It's a rather widely-diffused kind of gift. It's especially present in the ministry of our Lord, as are all the gifts. He is the perfect expression of all the gifts. He is the Prophet. He is the Teacher, the Exhorter, the Server, the Contributor, the One who gives leadership, the One who renders mercy. Especially in mercy, Jesus is continually identified as having it because in order to extend the gift of mercy, you have to find someone

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

who is in distress or need. It's very difficult to render mercy if there's nothing around that needs mercy. Need and distress are the keys which unlock the gift of mercy. And that obviously happened with the Lord.

Blind Bartimaeus, the beggar at Jericho, sits outside the town as Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem and cries out, "Jesus! Son of David! Have mercy on me!"

The Canaanite woman who has the demon-possessed daughter finds Jesus kind of on a spiritual retreat, when He wanted to be alone, and barges into the occasion. She doesn't know much about the Lord, but she knows this one thing: that He is a man of compassion. So she cries out to Him with full confidence, "Lord, have mercy on me!"

Jesus meets ten lepers who cry out to Him, "Jesus, have mercy upon me." A leper in the terminal stages of his illness. When Jesus sees him, Jesus is moved with compassion. Because compassion is a necessary feature of those who function in the gift of mercy.

Jesus said this when He came to the little village at Nain and there was a funeral procession.

There was the widow whose only son had died and was being carried out. The Scripture says, Luke indicates, "He had compassion on her."

There is a relationship overlapping between the gift of serving and the gift of compassion.

Sometimes they both accomplish the same thing. But I think a subtle difference is this: that a server concentrates more on doing the thing, whereas a mercy person is more involved in the feeling end of things. We looked at Martha, for example, as an exhibit of a server. She is concerned about getting food out on the table. But she's not so concerned about Mary's feelings. "Lord, get Mary with it!" That's not a very empathetic approach to life. But she's a server. The job's got to get done. If she's got to run over somebody to do it, you do it. Have you ever known anybody like that? "This is going to get done if it kills me. And you too." Their function is to serve.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

But the mercy person combines feeling and action. In the Good Samaritan story that I read is a classic example of the gift of mercy. He is identified as the man who talks to Jesus when Jesus asks him, “Who is the person who showed compassion, showed he was the neighbor?” The man replied, “He that showed mercy.” So Jesus’ story is a classic exhibit of what it means to function in this arena of the gift of mercy.

There are five characteristics of the gift of mercy, as exhibited by the Good Samaritan.

First, as the Scripture indicates, “When he saw him [the wounded man beside the road] he had compassion” (Luke 10:33).

I. Mercy people have an ability to see.

The priest walked by, the Levite walked by, and they just went the other way, let him lay there. They didn’t see him. I am not saying that it is ok, if you don’t have the gift of mercy, to walk by and leave wounded people by the side of the road. That would distort what Jesus is teaching in Luke. Like, “My ministry is prophecy and I’m on my way to the temple. Let the mercy people do that.”

But certainly a key feature of the mercy gift is this being able to see and see in such a way that feeling is evoked, compassion. An ability to identify and empathize with those in distress. The sort of people that God puts in the body with X-ray eyes to be sensitive when people’s feelings have been hurt or when something even has been said that could possibly be offensive to someone. They’re quick to come to that person’s support and aid and relieve them concerning embarrassment.

The Good Samaritan saw. That’s a quality of a mercy person. They do have eyes to see.

The second quality of a mercy person as seen in the good Samaritan is he went to him. He didn’t just go by him on the side of the road and go, “I really feel for that person laying there. My heart really goes out to that person. That priest and Levite, they didn’t have time to feel. I really feel

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

for that brother! But I've got a lot to do, I'd better get on my way." I think all of us feel, but the quality of the gift of mercy is not only do we feel it, but we do something about that feeling. We go to.

II. Mercy gifts, persons who possess them, are especially drawn to people who hurt.

They're drawn to the broken person, to the person in distress—to the underdog, if you will.

A third quality of the gift of mercy as exhibited in the Good Samaritan is that the Good Samaritan came to the man who was wounded and, Luke says: "He bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine." What does this symbolize?

III. The fact that the mercy person wants to heal.

They're not satisfied just to heal or just to come. They want something dynamic and positive and healing—and getting closure on that experience. Get health and get life. They want to bind up wounds, whether those wounds are psychological or physical. Mercy people want healing to come into existence.

A fourth quality of the good Samaritan is he focused on the person, not just the need of the person. Luke makes this very clear in telling the Lord's story. He says in verse 34: "He went to him, bound up his wounds, poured on oil and wine. Then he sat him on his own beast and brought him to an inn and took care of him." Underline that phrase "and took care of him." He is not just concerned about what is this going to cost, this motel bill. That must have been kind of a half-way house, motel-hospital. It was kind of a strange sort of an inn. But he wasn't concerned just about the physical arrangements. He took care of him. He was concerned about the whole person.

Here again there's a subtle difference between the gift of mercy and the gift of contribution. The gift of contribution, perhaps, could have been satisfied if he had simply provided for that man's financial resources. But the mercy person can't simply stop there.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

IV. The mercy person has got to get inside the skin, if you will, and feel with the person himself who's going through distress.

I'm not teaching that it's ok for contributors to simply give to people but not feel for people.

That would be a wrong emphasis. But there are, I think, some of these subtle distinctions.

A fifth characteristic of a Good Samaritan is that he provided for his needs according to the extent of his ability. He gave the innkeeper money to provide for him. In so doing, he sought nothing in return.

V. The mercy person is not out for awards, rewards, honor, recognition.

They're simply motivated, an intense motivation, because of a person's need.

Do you have the gift of mercy? Mercy is an attribute that God wants to develop in us all. But to some within this Body, God wants to develop it to an unusual degree so that, especially in that area of ministry, you shine as a mercy person.

I kind of want to spend the last few minutes to sort of draw together all of these features that we have looked at over these past three or four months in regard to the gifts, as to their functioning. Take time to delineate what each of them involve.

I've not been doing this to fill up time on a Sunday morning service with teaching which kind of falls on beaten ground, thorny ground, stony ground. It really falls on good soil. How do we kind of draw this together? Three special things I want to say about the functioning of these gifts in our Body.

The first thing that really strikes me as a scriptural principle is that these gifts are designed to function best within close community. And I'd underline the word "close." Often in American culture, we've been given the traditional understanding that church is something that meets from eleven to noon, or 8:30 to 9:30, or whatever. It's a one-hour-a-week-meeting kind of a thing.

Obviously, if the church is that, these gifts are worthless. These gifts simply cannot function in a

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

one-hour setting. In fact, one of the things about worshiping together as a whole, as a church, is the fact that there are very few gifts that come into play during our time of worship.

I don't struggle with that. I'm not rebellious towards that. I understand from the Scriptures that there are really two functions of the body of Christ. One is to be gathered together as a whole for the purpose of worshiping the Lord and receiving teaching. Another function of the Body is to be gathered together primarily for fellowship purposes.

The Early Church met daily in the temple, and they also met in homes. So when we gather together as a corporate group, our attention is more vertical. It's addressing ourselves to God, and letting God address us. When we disperse into smaller units, we're more interfaced with one another. We're in contact with one another as a Body.

These motivational gifts which I've been describing in Romans 12, most of them fit better in that small cluster of community of saints gathered together—subparts, if you will, of this larger Body. You really have not gotten into the living Church of Jesus if your involvement is confined to a one-hour-a-week public sort of a setting. We've sought, within this church, to make an emphasis of being a part of a smaller group. Many do that through the 9:45 adult fellowship, and others do it through home Bible studies. We've come a long way. We still have an awful long way to go. One of my dreams is to somehow institute, on a permanent basis, regional divisions within the congregation where people can cluster in flocks, if you will, and be together from time to time just for this purpose of allowing these gifts to express themselves. We need a regular association of smaller units.

In our culture in the southern California area in which we live, this is very, very tough. I think I realize this as well as anyone here—how tough it is to commit yourself to be part of a smaller group of believers. In our church we have problems like people coming from widespread geographical locations. We have disparate backgrounds, religiously, culturally, educationally.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

Some people are kind of “people” people. They like to be together. Other people like to be alone. Yet we’re called to measure that against scriptural understanding of how we’re to function as a body and we’re not to be alone. We have the problem of mobility, a high, rapid displacement in terms of moving—here today, gone tomorrow. We have such a thing as full personal schedules—people working at jobs that are hard and demanding. You want to advance in that job. Sometimes that one job doesn’t pay enough, so you have two jobs. A married couple, often there are two people working. Then you’ve got continuing education on top of that. Then you’ve got home improvements, recreation, certainly shopping. From time to time illness and all these things. It’s very hard to get community, isn’t it? All of these kinds of things going on.

We have a stimulated culture as well, which makes gathering together believers exceedingly difficult. By stimulated culture, for example, it’s very difficult to plan Bible studies on Monday nights during the fall. In addition to that, we have access, as believers, to parachurch and extra-church resources, like literature, and Christian books, and Christian bookstores, and Christian records, and Christian radio stations, and Christian television stations. We’ve got all these extra, additional spiritual resources, which are all fine. If your relationship is simply with a television in terms of your Christian walk, that’s just not quite personal. Then, on top of all that, we have rugged American individualism which says, “I’m strong enough to carry my own loads, bear my own burdens. I don’t need other people to get by because, with God’s help, I’ll get through life myself.”

All of these things mitigate against us really coming together. Yet we look at Scripture and find how very necessary coming together in close community is. In fact, several things I can say about that.

One is very clear from the Scripture. The Christian life is not designed to be lived alone. The only way the Christian life was designed to be lived alone is if circumstances require that you be

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

in solitary confinement or you have something that requires you to be absolutely in solitary.

Then God will give you the grace to get through that. Otherwise, He intends for us to live life together in a community of believers. There's some very good reasons for this. Two stand out immediately, why we need one another.

When I get depressed and get to be a lone, stray sheep wandering out here—and I think I'm the only one cast down—then it's essential that I have other believers. They'll come along with strong encouragement.

On the other hand, when I tend the other way, to be puffed up with pride and say, "I'm the greatest, I'm the best, I'm the latest," all these kinds of thing, I need other believers. Fortunately, this church functions that way. People who will come along and say, "Oh no you're not!" I need people bringing me back from my highs and bringing me up from my lows. That kind of honest, authentic sort of relationship.

Another reason why we need this close community as the people of God is that it's the only way love can be fulfilled. It's a difficult time, loving a mirror. Scriptures say, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). But I can read about love and theorize about love, but the only way I can demonstrate love is to be involved with real living human beings. Also Scriptures teach us to be together in close community. It's the only way we can have vital involvement of each person. There's no way we can, in a public setting, each of us have a vital involvement. I sometimes think the larger the group gets, the more we need to come down into smaller associations.

Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst" (Matthew 18:20). These meetings of two and three are vital in moments of communication and sharing because each person has to be involved if there are only two or three. Each of us then can share and contribute.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

If these gifts in Romans 12:6–8 are to come into function, their basic way of functioning is not when the Church as a whole is gathered, but when our church is scattered. I like what’s been said when a pastor was asked where was his church. He said, “Right now, my church is teaching school, it’s going to school, it’s working as a secretary on Capitol Hill. He goes through about eleven or twelve different things that the church was doing right at that moment. These things come into function as the church is dispersed. We know that God wants these attributes to be called into play in close community. These gifts are meant to function in close community.

The second thing about the gifts is that the motivational gifts described in Romans 12:6–8 function, noticeably, in crises. It is especially in crisis that we see their manifestation. If they’re going to function in crisis, that means there has to be something in place all the way along so they can, when a crisis comes up, operate.

Let’s imagine something. Suppose that I die suddenly, and my wife was left behind. How would these gifts come into function? If we’re functioning like the Scriptures indicate, the prophet is going to come along and say, “I have a word from the Lord for you.” They’re going to say something by way of insight from the Word. It may be something like Isaiah 43:2: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.”

The teacher is going to come along, and they’re going to be concerned that she get successful closure psychologically on this experience and know how to handle grief. They might take her through Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ five steps. Or the book *Mourning Song*. A teacher could systematically take one through the steps of grief. And, by the way, it not only occurs in death, but occurs in divorce and the like. Real grief. One works through process.

The prophet is concerned to bring an immediate word. The teacher is concerned to kind of begin to lay a systematic foundation on which to rebuild. Then the servers come along. They’re not

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

thinking about the Word so much, the teaching so much. They just see that there may be some need with assistance with the kids and with the house—practical kinds of things that servers do. The exhorter comes along. The exhorter is not a glib person that just slaps you on the back and goes, “Everything’s going to be all right.” Nothing is more frustrating in grief than somebody who comes along saying, “Everything’s going to be all right.” In a deep theological sense, we know that in Jesus everything will be all right. But you don’t want to be glib. The exhorter will come along with real supportive assurance, “The Lord’s with you.” And the exhorter will be concerned with encouragement.

Hopefully, someone will come along, and they’ll have the gift of contribution. They’ll be wise, though. Was there a will? Were there insurance policies? They will have been concerned that needs will be met. A contributor is saying, “What are the needs that can be met?”

The leadership person is going to come along, and they’re going to be concerned about, “Are you going to need to move to another house? Are you going to need to relocate? How are you going to manage your resources, your schedule? Are you going to go back to work?” All these things, they might try to give council in regard to that direction.

The mercy person will just come along and say, “I really feel for you.” And just be there.

All these things should be coming into play. I don’t really feel that our church functions in the extent that Paul’s asking it to function in Romans 12:6–8. What teaching does is bring something into existence that is not completely functioning as it ought. I always thank God for the progress that’s been made, but I’m a perfectionist. I want to see everything that should be there. You’re the people of this church, and it’s up to us as a whole to experience together these administrations of grace in our midst.

So at the moment that they’re needed—at the crisis where they’re called for—we just don’t expect that the people on the official staff of the church are the people who do the ministry.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

We're just part of the total ministry that's involved. Every one of you here is a minister. I still have this dream of putting up somewhere on the bulletin board names and faces of everybody in this congregation and putting a big title over it, "Our Ministerial Staff." That's really what the New Testament is saying. You are the ministerial staff of this church.

I've tried to say these gifts function best in crisis. There are really two kinds of heresy. There is doctrinal heresy, and there is relational heresy. There are certain gifts that are not related to doctrine, like serving and mercy. You don't have to have your doctrine straight on eternal security or eternal insecurity to be able to practice the gift of mercy. The Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets—meaning it proceeds from a firm teaching which is laid by the prophetic Word of God and by teaching from that Word. When it's built on that kind of a base, it frees the other gifts then to function rightly, and not just helter-skelter.

But I say that also to indicate that in the Scripture there are also two kinds of heresies. For centuries, the Church has concentrated on what I call the doctrinal heresy. Everything is written out in a doctrinal creed, and far be it for me to dispense with doctrinal creeds. I believe if one is to be a Christian, they ought to believe in all that the Scripture teaches. So I'm not for dispensing with creeds. But we can have the statement of creed and still be a nasty, mean person. Because we have not said anything about relationships. If it's possible to be a heretic in regard to doctrine, it's possible also for us to be a heretic relationally.

One of the problems with one of the churches in Revelation is they had it all together doctrinally, but they had it all wrong relationally. Some have it all right relationally and all wrong doctrinally. The Lord wants to put it together so that these function.

Basically, two things about the gifts in summary. One is they're designed to function in close community. And secondly, they're especially visible and should be especially visible in times of crisis.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

A third thing I want to say about the gifts. These motivational gifts are an integral part of our personality. They begin forming, I believe, early in life. I think there's scriptural principle to validate that because when God gives us the gift of grace, it is usually laid on top of the foundation of which our life has been building.

There are exceptions, true. But I think of the apostle Paul for, example. When the Lord called him to be an apostle, he comes from a background of rabbinical training. He is a Roman citizen and a Greek-cultured person. His life has prepared him for the role which God, through grace, has called him to—to be a missionary to the Gentile world, the Roman world, and to link together with the Jewish world. He was uniquely qualified by virtue of his training and propensity in life to be a candidate for the grace that was to be poured out upon him.

A word to parents about young children, and even teenagers. Recognize that in their unique personality, God may be molding some things together which will make them fitting candidates for these gifts of grace. Do you have a child who is a prophet? I began to realize in going through this series that I've got a daughter who will function well in this gift. She has a keen sense of right and wrong. She's very, very conscious of inconsistency—any broken promises or personal injustice. If you attempt to correct her and have not laid a sufficient base for that correction and simply attempt to impose your authority as a parent on the situation, she cannot suffer that. She just rebels that. I could look at that and say: "rebellious child." Our boy is not this way. He doesn't need an explanation. He just accepts whatever comes along. But our daughter is persnickety about justice and right and wrong. She's got the makings of a prophetess. That's what a prophet is concerned to do. Prophets generally are very rough on themselves. Be careful with prophets because they can get very down. "Woe is me, for I am undone!" said the prophet. He lives as holy a life as anybody in the Old Testament ever lived.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

Do you have a child who is a teacher? You look for such attributes as their being a good student, being systematic. Lining all their toys up, liking to read, those kinds of qualities. Develop that in them. They'll make a good teacher in the body of Christ.

Are they a server? Maybe Mommy's and Daddy's little helper. Always wanting to carry a hammer around or cook on the stove. Servers need plenty of commendation. Martha did. They can get very easily rattled because, often, they take on more than they can do, and they can't get it all done. They tend to get frustrated. Little servers need lots of encouragement. But they'll develop well.

Do you have an exhorter in the family? Someone who is outgoing—a teenager or child—outgoing, friendly, popular. They adjust well to changes. Some children adjust tremendously well to changes. Other children—you move, and it tears them up. I think part of it is the nature which God has imparted. A guy who is an exhorter, by and large, finds it very easy to adjust. They just fit in anywhere and immediately become at home. People like exhorters. These are likable kids.

Do you have a child who's a contributor? Our little boy is a contributor. He will think of things to give you that you haven't even asked for. It strikes me how unselfish he is. I'm not that way. I can remember when my folks were on the mission field and we'd get Christmas gifts up on the China-Tibetan border. From these missionary groups at home, we'd get Hershey bars. Getting a Hershey bar way up there was some treat. My dad had a mathematical formula by which that Hershey bar was divided. He always got the biggest piece because he was the father. (He didn't have the gift of contributing either.) Then everybody right down the line. And because I'm the youngest, I'd always get the smallest piece. All of us contribute, but some of us have the gift of contributing.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

Then there are leaders. You know, the kid that can come in and absolutely take over a group. I, again, feel our little boy is a mixture of contributor and leader. He was in a Sunday School class. The teacher left the room momentarily, and when he came back, there was George up at the chalkboard, and every kid in the class was lined up against the wall, and he was teaching them. He has a natural ability to make things gel.

Then there's the mercy person. This is the tenderhearted child or teenager. He looks for lonely people, looks for kids who don't have any friends—stray kids and stray pets. They're just concerned about rendering mercy. Often, when you discipline them, you don't need to hit them. You just say something to them, and their eyes just well up with tears. They're tenderhearted. The quality of mercy may be developing.

I share that to kind of provoke your imagination. You parents, look at your children and ask, "What gifts may God possibly be bringing into existence in my children that I can help strengthen and develop as a parent?"

How can I bring this all to conclusion and work in a Christmas theme on top of it? This came to me. At the birth of Jesus, it's surprising to watch which gifts function. The gift which is functioning the most is the gift of prophecy. It's everywhere. Elizabeth has it. Zechariah has it, Anna has it. Simeon has it. They're all declaring the word of the Lord. It's a momentous event. Prophecy is there—interpreting, explaining, coming direct from heaven through human agencies. Exhortation is there in a little degree. We wish it were there more. Maybe the only exhortations are the shepherds who bring consolation to Mary and Joseph in that lonely moment: "We just saw angels!" The Lord sent angels, and maybe the shepherds served an exhortative role. There's the role of contributor. The wise men served that. I think there's even the role of leader because Joseph has to mobilize the resources to get down to Egypt where the angel is directing

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

him to go. He took the three gifts the wise men brought and cashed them in, and that provided money. He was organizing for leadership.

There, maybe, is the teaching gift present. If you look at the prophet Simeon's words in Luke—where he gives an interpretive understanding of the mission of Jesus and the mission of Mary—he says, “He will be a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for my people Israel.” Then he says, “By him, many will rise or stumble. He'll be a sign spoken against. Mary, a sword will pierce through your own heart.” He's giving interpretive understanding to that event.

Strikingly, the gifts of service and mercy are missing from the nativity. We look at that, and our heart goes out to this terrible, impoverished situation where, if only the innkeeper would have had mercy in that moment to this woman whose time was due, he could have taken her into his own apartment. If someone would have just had mercy. And nobody was there to serve either.

We miss those gifts. It makes a very fragile and lonely moment in the Christmas story.

But when you look at the crucifixion and ask what gifts are present, a striking new situation develops. There are no prophetic gifts. No one in the community understands what's happening. There's no teaching gifts. No one can understand why this waste of the Lord's life, and why He's going to Jerusalem as He is. There is a contributing gift present. Joseph of Arimathea gives his tomb, but that's after the event. There's the mercy gift with Mary breaking the alabaster. She's empathetic and tuned in to what's going on in His life emotionally. She's the one who comes through with some mercy. The daughters of Jerusalem also wail for Him. There are no leadership gifts. The shepherd has been smitten, and the sheep are scattered.

There are very few gifts operative at the crucifixion. Mercy is there to a small degree. Maybe contributing is there to a small degree, and serving to a small degree. But at the death of Jesus, the leadership gift and all the speaking gifts—prophecy, exhortation—no one is there to

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

encourage Him except angels in the Garden of Gethsemane. Teaching, exhortation, and prophecy are all absent.

To me, that's a remarkable clue to the whole significance of Christmas and the whole Christ event from the manger to the empty grave and to the ascension. If Jesus simply was born as a baby and died a death on the cross—and did not come back from death as the living Lord of hell and the grave, and the Lord of all the hosts of heaven—if he didn't come back, all we have left really as human beings is the capacity to serve, to show mercy, to contribute, and, in some cases, to lead. But all of the other gifts—teaching, exhortation, and prophecy—are dead.

What can we prophesy when one way is as good as another? What can we teach when there is no authority or basis for our teaching if Christ is not who the Scriptures represent Him to be? And what ground of encouragement or exhortation can we have when we come to those key moments in life when we lay a loved one to rest or when we don't have answers to a situation? What can we say? All is black and hopeless. But Christ comes and, with His resurrection, bestows upon the Church all of the gifts which relate to not only what we might call common grace—what everybody can do whether they're Christian or not, like serve, render mercy, give contributions—but we have a chance to participate in those gifts which are special marks of being Christian, which give us our authority and our power. That we have a pure word from the Lord which we can speak in prophecy and in teaching and in exhortation. We have a ground of hope.

These gifts are for the Body and nobody else. Let's celebrate them and practice them and use them as Christ's body. At Christmastime, we remember His gifts to us. And we remember, as well, that when He ascended, Paul says, He gave to the Church gifts. And His gifts are people-related gifts. They are people, and they are qualities of His life which He leaves now for us to express.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

Romans 12:8

Closing Prayer

We praise Your Name, our Lord Jesus. And Your living presence, which we celebrate in this moment. We, too, come with the shepherds and with the wise men, saying in our hearts, “Come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.” Lord, over these months as we have sought to really understand a small segment of Your Word in these eight verses, we realize that You, in Your own teaching, indicated that some words fall upon the beaten path. Some fall on rocky ground. Some fall among thorns. But there is that of Your word which falls upon the good ground and brings forth—some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, and some an hundredfold.

Lord, we pray that our church, and our hearts individually, will be that good ground upon which Your Word has fallen. That to the extent that You desire, to their fullest expression these gifts will be operative among us as we seek to not only be hearers of the Word, but doers also.

Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.