

Starting with Socks

Divine Design – Finding Your Fit in the Body of Christ – Part VI

Romans 12:8a

Introduction

Can you imagine reporting to your first basketball practice as a member of the UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) basketball team? Imagine that, as a freshman, you have just made the team!

Now, some of you cannot imagine that because you would never play for anyone other than the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill or North Carolina State University, right? Well, try to imagine that you have made the UCLA team.

The coach of the team is the legendary John Wooden. He has led this team to four undefeated seasons and to ten national championships in a row. In fact, if you can believe it, he has led the UCLA Bruins to seven final four championships in a row!

As an incoming freshman, you have seen Coach Wooden's picture on *Sports Illustrated* as Sportsman of the Year. You are probably aware that he was named coach of the year six times.

You might have heard about his intense teaching method on the building blocks of basketball. Summarized in what was called, "The Pyramid of Success," this method included fifteen building blocks that would mark his coaching legacy and be copied by coaches all over the world. There were principles such as: enthusiasm, poise, teamwork, and loyalty.

Now, back to you. There you sit on the basketball court, awaiting the first pearls of basketball know-how. You are mesmerized by the

legend, the records, the program, the success. You are now awaiting this legendary coach's first words.

Perhaps you did not notice, but the older players are already beginning to smile at the new players. They know what is coming.

John Wooden walks out on the floor to where you and rest of the team are seated, and begins his first lesson. That lesson is on how to put on a pair of socks. That's right, socks!

Coach Wooden says nothing about the principles of the pyramid; nothing about the past or the present; nothing about strategy or skill, or even the schedule. He holds up a pair of socks, and then demonstrates to you and the other players, the way to put them on so there are no wrinkles or bulges.

Can you imagine this? "Here's how you put on a pair of socks!"

Coach Wooden then tells his players that if the socks are put on wrong, and left uncorrected, those little wrinkles and bulges will cause blisters that will hamper their performance at crucial times.¹

So, you have to have this sock thing correct first. This is the way you come dressed to play the game.

When I read that, I could not help but agree – as believers, we can so easily forget about the fundamentals of the race. We can talk strategy and philosophy; we can schedule and plan; we can get involved in teamwork, skill, conditioning, business, and movement, while often forgetting the underlying details that help us run the race.

Ladies and gentlemen, what socks were to the Bruins, and to basketball, spiritual gifts are to the

body. When you come, properly suited up to interact – to take the offensive or the defensive position on the court – you will be prepared to play well.

By the way, if you have been to a basketball game lately, you have probably noticed that none of the players ever took their socks off and waved them around. They did not sit around on the court, comparing their socks with the other players. They did not draw attention to their socks – their socks were just there.

In the same way, we are in the process of learning that we do not compare our gifts with other players on the team; we do not bring attention to them or wave them to the crowd. Our gifts are just there – enabling us to run the race, to honor Christ, to advance the gospel and mission of the church.

Spiritual Gift of Exhortation

Now, in our study today, the apostle Paul is acting as a divinely inspired coach of the church. As he moves into the arena of Christian living, in Romans, chapter 12, you would think he would immediately give pearls of wise strategy and practical advice. Instead, he begins by showing us how to suit up for the game – with spiritual gifts.

If you remember, a spiritual gift can be defined as, “*a God-given ability whereby the believer is able to serve the body of Christ with effective ministry.*”

In verse 6, Paul introduces us to the gift of prophecy.

In verse 7, he says, “if service, in his serving” (literally, if a table waiter, then in waiting tables), “or he who teaches, in his teaching”.

In our discussion today of verse 8, Paul introduces us to another gift,

or he who exhorts in his exhortation . . .

This is the gift of exhortation.

At first glance, this word might give you the wrong impression. “Exhortation” sounds harsh – someone who exhorts, sounds like someone who lectures another. The gift of exhortation sounds like the gift of scolding.

In reality, the Greek word for exhortation is a compound word from the word “para (παρα),” which means “alongside,” combined with the word “kalew (καλεω),” which is the verb “to call”. When you put them together, you get the word “parakalew (παρακαλεω),” which means “to call alongside” or, “to come alongside someone and speak for them”.

It is no surprise to discover that the Latin translation of this word is “advocatus” or “advocate”. It was used in ancient times for a lawyer.

This word is speaking of one who came alongside another and spoke on their behalf. It also includes the idea of counsel; that is, the giving of advise in order to bring aid to someone.

In a very real way, this gift is a lot like the gift of coaching. This is the guy who reminds you, “Don’t forget to put on your socks!”

If you went through the scriptures and looked at each verse in which this word “parakalew” or “paraklesis,” appears, you would soon understand that when Paul talks about the gift of exhortation, he is referring to someone who:

- brings encouragement to another person;
- helps others see the truth of scripture;
- exhorts the believer to persevere through trials;
- gives wise counsel;
- motivates and urges someone onward;
- comforts and offers hope that produces action.ⁱⁱ

This gift is more than someone who comes along, slaps you on the back, and says, without any real feeling, “Good going.” – or worse, “Good luck.”

In Romans, chapter 12, verse 8, where Paul writes of this particular gift, you could amplify the text to render it this way, “Let the person who has the gift of getting alongside another person to help them out, really do it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the father or mother who is running alongside their little girl as she is learning how to ride a bike. They are running beside her as she pedals, holding onto the back of the seat, and then letting it go, but continuing to run along, shouting encouragement, “You can do it! Keep pedaling! Watch out for the telephone pole!”

The person with:

- the gift of prophecy would say, “There is coming a day when bicycles will be invented and you must learn to ride them.”;
- the gift of helps would assemble the bikes, after they have been invented, and would then make sure a shipment arrived at the church;
- the gift of teaching would call a meeting, stand up, and explain to everyone, in three

alliterated points, the principles of balance and motion, along with the proper hand signals;

- the gift of giving would make sure everyone had a bicycle, even if it meant giving their own away;
- the gift of mercy would arrive early and set up a first aid booth – armed with band aids and Neosporin – ready for the first spill, and would be somewhat disappointed if there were none!

The person with the gift of exhortation would be the one standing in the parking lot, next to a bicycle, shouting, “C’mon, already, it’s time to ride!”

The exhorter would be the one to put you on the bicycle and say, “Now, start pedaling. I’m right here. You can do it! Don’t stop!”

The gift of exhortation is a ministry of presence.

It should be no surprise to discover that this word, translated “exhorter,” is the same word used by Jesus Christ to identify the Holy Spirit.

In the gospel of John, the disciples are in a panic. Jesus Christ has just informed them that He is going to be leaving them. They are confused, hurt, insecure, afraid. Their leader has only recently begun talking, with clearer vocabulary, that He is going to die.

Now, in the upper room, Jesus informs them that He will be denied by Peter, betrayed by another, separated from the disciples, memorialized in death by wine and bread. The disciples hit the panic button.

In John, chapter 13, verse 36a,

Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” . . .

In verse 36b,

. . . Jesus answered, “Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later.”

In verse 37a,

Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not follow You right now? . . .”

Then, in chapter 14, verse 5,

Thomas said to Him, “Lord we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?”

With childlike fear, so young in their faith, they are responding just like we would have. We often

overlook that fact, because we know how the story turned out.

Imagine telling your children tonight, “Listen, Mommy and Daddy have to go on a journey; we have to leave the house. We can’t tell you how long we’ll be gone, or when we’ll be back, or exactly where we’re going, but we have to leave you tonight.”

“What?! Don’t go! We can’t be left alone!”

That is exactly the disciples’ response. So Jesus adds, in John, chapter 14, verse 16, “But don’t worry, you won’t be alone. When I ascend to the Father, . . .”

“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever;”

The Father will send you another Helper, “Parakletos,” or an exhorter, encourager, comforter, helper, advocate, defender.

The person in the body of Christ who has the gift of exhortation needs to develop a strong understanding of the biblical role of the Holy Spirit, because they happen to be imitating His ministry.

You may be thinking, “I might have this gift, but can you give me some leads; a little more information?”

Fortunately, God’s word never asks us to be something without giving us an example made out of flesh and blood.

In general, you see it all around you when you come to the assembly. We are told to encourage one another; “to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, . . . as [we] see the day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)

In other words, we should all be involved in the ministry of exhorting one another, every chance we get, to keep pedaling.

And by the way, did you remember to put your socks on right?! You don’t want to get blisters, so suit up the right way! Drink plenty of the water of the word.

We all are involved in this.

Our first home in Cary was a “fixer upper”. We did not know it, however, when we bought it. The roof leaked, and we discovered that the roofing underneath the shingles had rotted. The heating system was broken and the flooring under the master bath had nearly rotted through. If it had not been for a builder in our young church who came and fixed everything, we would have gone bankrupt.

The house had a red brick fireplace, which we tore out and replaced with river stones – before we knew the house had other problems. When our first winter arrived and we found out the heater was completely broken, we kept a fire roaring in that fireplace. Even after the heating system was replaced, I had learned to love making a fire in that stone fireplace. There is nothing quite like the snapping and crackling of a real fire.

For those of you who have worked with a fire, you know the importance of the fireplace poker. That is the steel rod with a black pointed end, and maybe a little hook on one side as well, that you can use to pull logs around and snag the timber. From time to time you use that instrument to stir up the smoldering embers – and what happens? They burst back into flame.^{iv}

That is the ministry of exhortation. That is the strategy of our assembly – we prod one another and smoldering embers burst back into flame.

I have to tell you that for me, there is nothing that brings smoldering embers in the assembly back into flame like the ministry of music. We have sixty or seventy teenagers singing in our assembly today – all of whom are dressed alike and seemingly in their right minds. They are hearing and joining in with us as we sing.

The orchestra and adult choir have today off. I usually sit backstage, between the edge of the choir and the kettle drums and snare drums, just behind the brass section with the trombones and trumpets. I love sitting in that area – you can definitely feel the Spirit moving over there! If the embers in your heart do not catch fire, come and sit with me – there is nothing like it!

Kenneth Gangel, a former professor at Dallas Seminary, provoked my thinking when he wrote that there is not a gift of music, in the strict sense of spiritual gifts. However, the church is commanded to sing (Ephesians 5:19). Singing and making melody and music and harmony with instrumentation, as we are told in the book of Psalms, is when theology is powerfully communicated to the assembly. The church is literally exhorted through this public ministry, to recall the great truths of God's grace, power, and love, and to live for Jesus Christ.

Dr. Gangel wrote that making music is a way of exercising the gift of exhortation!

Imagine, we may have neglected this perspective too long!

Dr. Gangel ended with this challenge, “[Future] choir members, neglect not the gift that is in you!”^v

Do you want to challenge people to stand for Christ? Do you want to encourage a broken heart? Do you want to provide joy to the weary?

Join the other exhorters who lead us in singing and playing instruments as we together, glorify God.

So, generally speaking, we see the ministry of exhortation occurring all around us. Our assembly together is a prime place where it takes place.

More specifically, we have the ministry of the Holy Spirit who encourages, convicts, reproves, instructs, and motivates us through the ministry of the Word of God.

Even more specifically is the ministry of individuals who personally connect with us in our walk. They are the incarnation, so to speak, of the Holy Spirit's ministry. They have the gift of exhortation.

This was the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, as recorded in Acts, chapter 14, verses 21b through 22.

... they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith [in other words, “Keep pedaling! Don't give up!”], and saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

I love that! The message of an exhorter is perfectly seen in that text – “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Two parts to an exhorter's message

From this modeling of exhortation, we can easily observe two parts to an exhorter's message. Let me give them to you.

Realism

1. Part one of an exhorter's message is realism.

“Hey, disciples of Jesus Christ, you're going to have trials and tribulation! Make sure your socks are pulled up tight and they're on right, because you are in for the race of your life.”

By the way, people with the gift of exhortation do not like pious platitudes. They are the last person on earth to say, “Well, God will bless you.” – when what is needed is a dose of realism.

They talk straight and they get to the point.

An exhorter does not like to waste time. This is like John the Baptist who exhorted an entire nation. His message was fairly simple – “You’re all a bunch of hypocrites and you need to repent.”

I attended a Christian school – the same one, in fact, from kindergarten through high school graduation. When I was in the eleventh grade, I worked at the school to help my parents pay the tuition costs.

At that time, I was struggling with my hypocrisy. On the outside, to most people, I was a missionary kid who kept his slate pretty clean. However, I ran around with some guys who did not really care. I avoided capture and exposure on several occasions, and somehow managed to stay one step ahead of my teachers and my principle. I was involved in a struggle of surrender.

One day after school hours, I was sweeping the gym floor with a wide dust mop. I was all alone sweeping in the center court of the big gymnasium and the side door opened. Mr. Garrick, the school administrator, who was a large, strong man, with gray hair, walked, without saying a word, out onto the gym floor. I stopped sweeping as he walked up to me and I remember his words vividly. He said, “I know you haven’t been caught doing anything wrong, but I know. I know who you are. You are not fooling me.”

He then turned and walked away.

It was as if I had been visited by John the Baptist – wearing a camel hair blazer and wing-tips.

God used that confrontation, and others, to bring me that summer, to a point of surrender to Jesus Christ.

Mr. Garrick had the gift of exhortation.

Someone who exercises the gift of exhortation will:

- persuade a believer to turn from a sinful behavior or habit;

- admonish the church to obey the word;
- comfort a brother or sister in the Lord who is suffering;
- encourage a weak believer who needs to make a commitment;
- write a note or make a call to encourage someone who is grieving or depressed;
- inspire a brother or sister to trust God with a career decision;
- challenge the status quo in a conversation with a compromising believer;
- rebuke a wayward believer who needs to be confronted with their sin.

The message of exhortation, modeled by Paul and Barnabas, is a message of realism. There is also a second part to the message.

Hope

2. Part two of an exhorter’s message is hope.

Look again at Acts, chapter 14, verse 22b,

... and saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Yes, you are going to encounter troubles and affliction and pain – that is Christianity! But we happen to be heading for the glorious kingdom of God.

Oh, do not forget this. God is alive and trustworthy, and His kingdom is not a mirage! It is in the distance, but it is real – and we are headed for it.

So, grab a good pair of socks and put them on right. They are the underlying, invisible foundation for the way you think and live by the power of the Spirit. Then, get in the game! You are needed by the body of Christ.

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ⁱ <http://www.espn.go.com/page2/s/questoins/wooden>.

ⁱⁱ Charles R. Swindoll, *He Gave Gifts* (Insight for Living, 1992), p. 38.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Boice, *Romans: Volume 4* (Baker Books, 1995), p. 1586.

^{iv} John Phillips, *Exploring Romans* (Moody Press, 1969), p. 195.

^v Kenneth O. Gangel, *You and Your Spiritual Gifts* (Moody Press, 1975), p. 30.