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So before getting started this morning, I want to take just one moment to give another life update. The first time that I had an opportunity to speak, I got to tell you all some about what I am doing, what I study at school, my family, my friends and so just before we get started this morning, I figured I'd tell you all about what I will be heading into this semester. Tomorrow at wonderful 7 a.m., I start driving down to Florida. My best friend, Carrie, who's been living with us, we're going to be taking the long trek down. And so, we're going to take a couple extra days and as of next weekend, I will be in West Palm Beach getting ready to start another semester at my school, Palm Beach Atlantic University. This upcoming semester, I will have opportunities to take classes in culture, learning more about how to worship God through dance and to truly worship Him in my studies. And I will also have the position this semester where I will be serving in a way where I'm helping freshmen to figure out what they're going to study in school, which I am extremely excited about. My journey to figuring out God's calling for my degree was very complex, and so I'm excited to get to be there for them. And I will also have an opportunity to continue mentoring some girls that I led in a Bible study last year. And I'm very excited to be with them and get to speak into their lives and have them speak into my life truly, every single day.

So, this morning, I want to start with a question. Who are we as the church? And why does it matter that we have God's word? I think it's really interesting to have someone come up here and share a devotional message. And it can be a little bit confusing when a pastor normally takes about a week to prepare everything they're going to say and look at them and minute details of the Hebrew and the Greek. But when someone shares a devotional message, what you see is that there's so much more you can learn from Scripture when you even just take 15 minutes to pour yourself into it. And so, I want to share two verses with you that I think really share why this matters to me. Why it matters to me to take time to be in God's Word. The first of those is 2 Timothy 3 verses 16 and 17. In my Bible classes, we look at a lot of scripture that helps us to learn why we're reading scripture. And this is one of those main verses, and it reads:

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training and righteousness that the Man of God may be complete equipped for every good work.*

If Scripture is breathed out by God, just like creation is, then I want to take the time to get to know it. I want to be transformed by it, by its teaching and reproof and correction and training and righteousness. I want that to be a part of my life. And so just as this verse really shares God's heart for His word, another verse that I found extremely helpful is Revelation 7 verses 9 through 10, where I think we really get to see God's heart for the world.

*After this I looked and behold a great multitude no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. Standing before the throne, before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands and crying out with a loud voice. Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.*

And so, studying God's word matters to me, not only so that because I care about God's heart, but because I see His heart for the nations around Him. And I want to be a part of connecting with people. Of speaking with people. Of listening to people. And of showing God's love and truth to the world and that is what the church is called to. So, who are we? Who are we as the church?

In the book of Romans, the church in Rome was trying to figure out this very question. As many of us know, the church had a bit of a tumultuous start. There was a lot of conflict, a lot of fighting and a lot of violence. And as the church started in Rome, it began with a group of Israelites, just as it did in Jerusalem. And as the Gentiles were preached to, they then came in and became a part of this church. But around that same time, the Jewish people. Forgive me, I don't remember all the details of my history, but they were sent out of the city of Rome. They couldn't be in the city anymore and so what happened is the Roman Church was led by only Gentiles. Over time, these restrictions on the Israelites were taken away, they reentered Rome, and all of a sudden you had the Roman church with the old Jewish leadership that had returned and the Gentile leadership that was in place. And they were left with this question of who are we? What are we supposed to do with this?

Paul uses the letter to the Romans to help give them an answer. He spends the first about 11 chapters of this book building doctrine. And doctrine's great. But then he does something that I love and starts at Chapter 12 until the end and takes everything and makes it a bit more practical. And so, what he does in chapters 1 through 11 is that he helps the people of the Roman church to see that what started as the family of Israel, the Gentiles, have now been grafted into that. And so, they need to ask the question not only who are we, but how do we live? And that is where we are when we get to Romans 12. As I said, Romans 12 is where Paul switches things up. He starts wanting to make things more practical. And so, as we look at this verse, we're going to start just a little bit earlier in verse 3. And this is what Paul writes:

*(Romans 12:3-8) For by the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you to not think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For us in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function. So, we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. Let us use them if prophecy and proportion to our faith, if service in our serving. The one who teaches in his teaching. The one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity, and the one who leads with zeal. The one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness.*

At the beginning of Romans 12, Paul asks those reading and those listening- I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies of a living sacrifice.

So right away He's saying what his point is. I've just built all this doctrine and we've all seen what God has done, so let's live for Him. But he wants to make it more practical than that. He has more to say. But in verse 3, he takes a moment to check the listener's pride. He says: We are all part of the body of Christ, but just as a body works, not all of us can do everything. He doesn't want us to get cocky. He's saying, Yeah, I know you might think that you're able to do this and you're able to do this and you're able to this, but you can't do all of it. And I know one thing that I found a little bit interesting as I was reading this is the phrase according to the measure of faith that God has assigned, and in some versions, it says according to the grace that has been given. And I think it's important to clarify here that it is not referring to the actual amount of grace that we've been given in forgiveness of our sins, but rather, God has given us all grace, and he provides each one of us with the faith to trust in him. But even though faith has been equally given and grace has been given, that is going to be lived out in different ways. And so, we have to look at ourselves as a body. We have to say, what can I do that someone else cannot and what can they do that I certainly know that I can't. And just as a body works, you need all these pieces together to help it function well.

I've had a great example of this this summer working in the office here at St Paul's. I think a great example of it is when you look of at the dynamic of Pastor David and Barb who runs our office. They are a phenomenal team. You have this side of heart and listening and trying to look at the big picture and someone who really cares about the practicality and the little details and seeing how this all is going to work. It's a very heart and head dynamic, and they work together really well, just as a body does.

And I definitely know that I've seen examples of this in my life. Sometimes we think we can do everything, and I'm definitely no exception to that. This past year I've mentioned before I worked as what's called a discipleship leader over a dorm at my school. And in this role as a discipleship leader, I had three components. I spent time in prayer. I spent time leading a Bible study and I spent time one on one discipline girls. And especially when it came to this Bible study, I was supposed to bring alongside me what we call discipleship assistants, which were other students in the dorm who could support me and walk beside me and be in prayer with me. And I was very excited to have these discipleship assists but I definitely remember when I stepped into the role, thinking to myself, I got this. We're going to be fine. Like, yeah, there are about 300 girls in this building, but it's going to be okay. I got the Holy Spirit, and that's all I need. Well, Paul's writing to the church, and he's very clearly saying, just so you know, you don't only need you. Yes, you've got the Holy Spirit. But he gave you a community for a reason and even though I thought that, you know, I think I'll be okay, I did bring people alongside me and praise the Lord I did! My friend Carrie and two other girls named Daisy and Ali came alongside me and became my team. And I experienced two really wonderful things when that happened. One is that discipleship is really my heart. There are few things I love more than just getting to pour into someone and then watch them go live for Christ. If you've never had that opportunity, it is amazing to watch, to get to say to them, I see where you're going with this and it's amazing and it really impacts my heart. Look at this and look at this area and see how you can shape that. And then to watch them take that in and see that touch other people's lives. It was a beautiful experience and one I never would have had if I hadn't trusted God in saying that I need more than myself. And I also got to see in doing

that how very much I did need to those girls. They would lead Bible studies when I was there and when I wasn't there, they would pour into other girls in the dorm that I couldn't possibly reach because for one person-300 is a lot. I saw them love on people in ways that I never could. And it was such a blessing to get to see a community come together, not because of the leadership of one but because of the love and trust between the church.

And so, this is how Paul leads into the verses that we have this morning, verses 7 and 8. He's saying you are all different. But unlike how sometimes he points out, you're all different and so you struggle with all these different things. Here he is saying you were all different and you were all blessed in different ways. And so, this is what we come to in verses 6, 7 and 8:

*Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. If prophecy in proportion to our faith in service. If service in our serving. The one who teaches in his teaching. The one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity. The one who leads with zeal. The one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness.*

Those of you who got to hear my last message know how much I love practical preaching. I think it's really helpful because so often you walk into a service and you hear something about how Jesus loves you and then you leave and you're like, That was great, but what do I do with it? Paul is feeding right into that part of my soul with this passage. He's saying, These are ways that you might be gifted and why they matter.

So now I'm going to take a moment to walk through each of these and what he's saying. First, he says, if prophecy in proportion to her faith. For those that have been given the gift of prophecy, Paul is reminding them that it doesn't matter that they have the gift of prophecy if they're not fully relying on the Holy Spirit. Similar to speaking this morning, I would have nothing to say right now if I wasn't trusting that the Holy Spirit is going to give me something. People with the gift of prophecy, he wants to make sure they know that if it's coming from you, well, then it's not coming from God. It has to be the Holy Spirit flowing through you.

Then he says, in service, in our serving. In this context, when he's talking about service, he means those people that are serving much more physical and practical sort of needs, the people that come in before we have a funeral at the church, and they set up a meal downstairs to care for the family. Those people who take the time to hand your communion elements to you. Who wants to give in such a way that their time is being used for God's glory? Then he says: The one who teaches in his teaching. When we look at a teacher, this is where we start to think about someone who is stewarding God's word. Someone who says, this is what I have learned from this very important text, and this is how I'm going to share it with others. Someone who is a teacher takes their life experience, takes the things that they read and shares it with others, not because they have knowledge that they think is important, but because they want to see it transform other people's lives too.

For one who exhorts in his exhortation. Exhortation is a weird word. I often forget what it means. It basically means encouragement for the one who encourages in their encouragement. I don't know if you guys have ever met one of those people where no matter what kind of day you're having or how your week has been, you walk up to them and you can't help but feel lightened. And you can't help but feel like some of the weight has been lifted off your shoulders because they just bring such a joy in the way that they support you and the way that they support everyone. Those are people with this gift of encouragement. I have a very beautiful example of this in my life in my mom, who, when she meets people, can just bring them this piece in this joy and they feel cared for. And then she might walk away and go say hi to someone else. And they don't know quite even what the conversation was, but they feel better. They feel better because of it.

Then he says, the one who contributes in generosity. God has blessed us in many different ways, and some people are blessed financially. He wants to make a point about this here, that those people who have been called by God into a profession or a life where they are able to gain wealth. As the church they are called to give that. And that's why we make a point of talking about it on Sunday morning when we use the word generosity is because in Scripture, those who have gained wealth are called to share it with those around them. That may look very different. It may mean giving it to your church, but it may mean calling people to come into your home and providing them with beautiful meals and beautiful experiences where they're getting to spend time with you and getting to be cared for and loved upon.

And then he says, the one who leads with zeal. One phrase that I hear a lot in my schooling is the idea of servant leadership. And I truly believe that a leader is actually called to be one of the biggest servants in any group of people. The person who leads are called to give themselves and their heart and all that God has shown them in their lives to those around them. They're not meant to just tell people what to do, but to guide people to see what God is doing.

And then he finishes by saying the one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness. When you are someone who sacrifices a lot, who has a tendency to put themselves on the back burner and make sure that you're caring for everyone around you. It can become exhausting and there are a lot of different facets to that and how we care for others. But when someone has the gift of mercy, it brings them joy and happiness to take that time to give to the people around them. But it can also become tiring after a while, even if you love giving and you love caring, God wants them to know that you need to remain cheerful in this and that he will give you the strength to remain cheerful in it.

So we go through this list, and I'm sure some of you were thinking to yourselves, okay, yeah, I can see how that one might apply to me, or I can see how maybe that one really fits my personality or that one doesn't work at all. And others of you are probably thinking to yourselves, Well, I have no idea. I've never even considered the fact that God's given me a spiritual gift of one of these things. I don't know how to use it. And so I want to finish this morning with two reminders. The first of these is that these abilities that God gives us, these strengths, we don't start being able to do it perfectly and well, we'll never be able to do it perfectly. God gives us room for growth. He gives us the room to learn about

ourselves and to learn what he's calling us to and how he can use those things that he's given us.

And so, I want to encourage you to do two things. One is to ask a couple questions. The first is to look at yourself and say, Where are my strengths? Where are the places, I've been successful in life and joyful in what I'm doing? And while it might have been in this job as a schoolteacher, what really brought me success there? And then take that same question of what are your strengths and bring that to the people around you, the people that know you. Say to them, You've seen me live life. You've seen the things I can do. What can I actually do? What might I be able to do with that moving forward? And then to think about all of what you've processed, to think about what people have shared with you and pray about it. Take a moment to pray over all of that and lifted it up to God.

The second thing, which is a very practical piece of advice, is that there are a lot of great books that have been written by wonderful Christian authors on how to start to figure some of this out. What is God calling me to? How is He gifted me to do those things? And one book for me that was probably the most essential in starting to answer this question is a book titled 'For Courage and Calling' (Author Gordon T. Smith). I need to remind myself of the author, and if you have questions, I'm sure you can find it after the service. But in for Courage and Calling, the author walks through what it means to honor God in everything we do. And as he talks about this, he touches on one thing that I found really impactful, which is that no matter what we're called to, God calls us to excellence. That sounds strange, especially when you think of excellence as how you're performing in school, which I know is the first thing I thought when I heard excellence, I was like, Oh, so God's calling me to get good grades. God does want you to pursue your studies and to do them well and with honor. But he's not necessarily calling you to good grades. I still need to get that one through my head. But he is calling us to excellence.

Often in the church we go on Sundays. We maybe serve a day during the week. And we say this is enough. We walk into church on Sunday, be intentional about greeting a couple people, maybe help clean up after the service and we say, this is enough. I am living for God. But I want to close with a little story that I think some of you've probably heard before.

In the beginning, God made everything. He made the birds and the plants and the fish and the lights and the dark and he made all of us. And then us, in our humanness and in our brokenness took what he had made, and we crushed it and we said, I don't want that anymore. And so, we walked away from God. But God had a plan. He had a master plan because that's who He is. And He said, I love these people so much that I'm not going to let them walk away that easily. And so, he spent centuries and centuries pursuing this nation called Israel. We're repeatedly he would say to them, I love you. I have better for you. And they would step into that truth and then they turn away from it again. And this didn't just happen once. This happens like 50 billion times. There is this cycle where Israel would say, yes, we want what you have for us. God, we want you. And then would go back on that thinking that there must be something more. And this went on for centuries. God eventually saw that while some of his people might dedicate themselves to taking his word and diving into studying it, and others would live their lives sort of keeping the Sabbath.

Clearly his people had decided that there were idols more deserving of worship than he had.

But you see, God, He didn't even need a plan B. His master plan was still at work. And so, He sent His son. And Jesus came on to the scene and everything changed. Jesus didn't come as the king that Israel was wanting because they'd been persecuted for ages. Instead, He came as a baby. And He was humble and lowly. And He lived a childhood where He pursued God. We don't see much about Jesus when He was young, but we know that He spent time in the temple because His Father was there. And then Jesus grew up. And the first thing that He did in the start of His ministry was what every other Jewish person did at that time when they needed forgiveness and that was get baptized. He didn't put himself above those around Him. But He got baptized. And the Spirit came down on Him and His ministry began. And now Jesus' ministry was like none before Him. Not only did He not sin, but He spent every day loving and caring and serving and giving all of Himself to the people around Him. He disciplined a group of young guys and helps them to see how they could give all of themselves to the world to. And He lived not only a perfect life in the sense that we might view perfection. But it was perfectly loving and perfectly timed and perfectly humble. And then for some reason. He decided to die on a cross for us. Who does that? He spent a life living perfectly, giving His heart and then giving His body. But our God is a great God. Not only did He give himself for us. But He raised up. And now we have this magnificent, beautiful, all truthful, all loving King who pursued us first so that we would pursue Him.

In Romans Chapter 8, Paul writes, What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son that gave Him up for us all. How will He not also with Him graciously give us all things. Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Jesus Christ is the one who died. More than that, who was raised. He was at the right hand of God. Who is interceding for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This story that I've just told, that's the story that was in the minds of all of Paul's readers as they came to Romans 12. And I don't know about you, but when I hear that I don't want to just walk into a church on a Sunday morning. I want to look at the body of Christ. I want to see the gifts that God has given to me and to the people around me. And I want to live them out with more excellence than I could ever muster on my own. Because if Jesus died on a cross for me, the least that I could do is spend every single day in service to him. God equips each and every single one of us for the service that we are called to. I want to do it. And I want to do it well. And I ask all of you to come alongside me whether you know what your gifts are and have been pursuing them for years and pursuing God for years. Or feel like God's given, you know, abilities and you're just kind of existing here going, okay, I like this whole Jesus thing, but I can't walk it out yet. We're at the church. We'll come alongside you. Because we're a body and we'll do it together because we can't do it alone. So, whatever this means for you, today or tomorrow or next week look to God. Find out how you need to take the next steps. To pursue the gifts He's given you and to see those gifts and others. And to walk with God into what he's doing in the church. Would you pray with me?

Dear God, I thank you that you have given us yourself. You've given us your love. You've given us your truth. And I'm so thankful, Lord that you are within us. God, I ask that you would give us a way to take the next steps forward. That you would help us to walk in the path that you have for us. I ask that for those of us who have been walking with you for a long time, that we would come alongside those who are just getting to know you to help them to see what you may be doing in their lives. How you have loved them uniquely and how they can serve you. God. I ask this for myself. That I would see how you want me to serve and to love and to give. That You would help me to see the gifts they've placed in my life and to live them out, whether here or in Florida or in all of the nations to which you may send me. Amen.