

# Playing for God's Team

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Romans 12:3-8

January 20, 2019

## Introduction:

I was fortunate to be living in Chicago during the years that the Chicago Bulls were utterly dominating the NBA. I was finishing up my last year at Moody Bible Institute and Karen and I were living on a ninth-floor apartment in downtown Chicago. We lived only a few blocks away from Rush St., which had a number of sport bars on it, when the Chicago Bulls won the championship in 1996. The whole city erupted in celebration and we could easily hear the cheering coming off Rush St. from our apartment. In fact, I don't think we got much sleep that night because there were cars constantly driving past, honking horns and celebrating loudly well into the wee hours of the morning. But we didn't mind. It was fun to be so close to the action and to enjoy the fact that we were living in the city with one of the greatest basketball teams ever with arguably the greatest basketball player ever.

Now I don't think I need to give much explanation when I mention Michael Jordan. He's to basketball what Babe Ruth is to baseball: truly a legendary player, unquestionably one of the all-time greats. You don't think of the Chicago Bulls of the 1990s without thinking of Michael Jordan. But as great of a player as he was, he didn't single-handedly win those championships. Michael Jordan *by himself* would never have won any basketball games, no matter how good he was. He needed his teammates. Jordan's success with the Chicago Bulls depended on the help of others: on coach Phil Jackson and fellow players like Scottie Pippen and Dennis Rodman. Basketball is a team sport and no one person can do it all alone.

What's true for the Chicago Bulls is true for the church. Christianity is a team sport. God has not called us to single-handedly do everything ourselves; he's called us to be part of a team known as the church, that works together to accomplish our goals. So I'm going to use this sports metaphor to help us think through the passage in Romans we have before us today. In it, we're called to team up with other believers and use each of our unique gifts and talents for the sake of the church. So let's take a look at what the apostle Paul has to say by opening your Bibles to the twelfth chapter of Romans. This morning's passage can be found on pg. 948 of the hardcover Bibles in the pew in front of you. We're giving our attention to v. 3-8. Please follow along as I read through the entire passage. Again I'm reading Romans 12:3-8. Paul writes, **"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to 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 as 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, in 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; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."**

So running with the sports metaphor, I have three points that I want to highlight from this passage. You could consider these as coaching instructions for you. So then, given that Christianity is a team sport, here's the first thing this passage coaches us on...

### 1. **Don't think you're a superstar (v. 3)**

It would have been easy for Michael Jordan to become arrogant. After all, he was exceptionally gifted at basketball, but if he had gotten a big head and demanded that all the attention be given to him, then everyone on the team would have suffered. If they passed the ball to Jordan all the time and always depended on him to take all the shots and get all the rebounds, it wouldn't take long for the other team to figure out how to defend against that. So thinking you're "all that" is not good for a team sport. Large egos need to be kept in check if a team is going to function properly.

In light of that, look at v. 3 once again. Paul warn us, **"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to 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."** In other words, don't think you're the superstar. Don't get a big head and imagine that you're "Mr. Big Deal." You may very well be extremely gifted and talented, but you need to have some humility about how you view yourself lest you become egotistical and arrogant.

So for example, some of the positions on our church team are very public, high-profile roles. I'm the Lead Pastor, so I get to be up front every Sunday and preach. That's a big role I have in the church. Pastor Kyle also is up front leading worship every Sunday and he leads the youth group. Those are significant responsibilities that are important to the functioning of our church. But just because Kyle and I stand in front of you every week and lead you in worship and prayer and in the preaching of God's Word doesn't mean we should think so highly of ourselves that we conclude we're better than you or more valued by God than you. The position we play on this church team is important, but we're not superior to any of you who don't have our position. Paul warns us here that Kyle and I shouldn't think too highly of ourselves.

But that goes for any of us. This certainly is a greater danger for those who are up front like we are, but any one of us could be this way. You can become arrogant because you teach a class each week and think you're the cat's meow. You can be involved in a behind-the-scenes ministry that you elevate in your mind as the most important thing the church does. Perhaps you give generously and you begin to think that the church would go bankrupt if you weren't keeping it afloat, so people ought to defer to you more. It can happen in all kinds of ways, no matter what your involvement.

So how do we guard against this insidious arrogance that can view ourselves as being the superstars of the church team? I think there are two guardrails against pride that Paul hints at in this verse. First, notice how he prefaces his statement. He says, **"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..."**

A great deal of a self-inflated ego can be deflated by simply remembering that you are who you are by the grace of God. Your abilities, talents and skills ultimately are given to you by God. None of us has to be gifted at anything. I know this quite well in my own life. Considering how paralyzed with fear I used to be of public speaking back when I was in high school, it's only by the grace of God that I'm up here in front of all of you rather than cowering under a rock right now. The fact that God called me to be a pastor and allowed me to have sufficient oratory skills that people actually want to come and listen to anything I have to say on a weekly basis is pure grace. I know I don't deserve this and I'm well-aware God could take any of it away at any time, so recognizing that my position as pastor is a gift of God's amazing grace has a profound way of keeping me humble. I am what I am solely by the grace of God.

But the second way we can keep our egos in check is found in the second half of v. 3. Paul tells us not to think our ourselves more highly than we ought, and then says we are instead **“to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”** Now I think this is easier to do the more we've grown in our faith, and so that's what the very last part of the verse is saying, but I want to focus more on the phrase right before it, **“to think with sober judgment.”** To be **“sober”** is to be clear thinking, not to be clouded in your opinion about yourself. Some people can be drunk on their own sense of greatness, and so in order to avoid that we need to regard ourselves with **“sober judgment.”** So how do we do that?

I think a key way for this to happen is by allowing others to speak truth into our lives. We need the judgment of others to help us get a proper perspective on ourselves. Spouses are a wonderful gift to this end. My wife has a way of keeping my ego in check. Karen is willing to call a spade a spade. If I get a little too haughty about a sermon I think really rocked, Karen has a gentle way of keeping my feet grounded. And, on the other hand, she also helps me from falling off the edge into discouragement and depression. I don't always view myself correctly: sometimes I can get arrogant and other times I can teeter on the edge of despair, and so my wife helps to keep me sober-minded in how I view myself. She can see things better about me than I can often see about myself.

But even beyond our spouse, we need to be in community so that others can help us get the right perspective on ourselves. I need people who can recognize my strengths but also call me out in my weaknesses. Thus, I need the church. I need to be around brothers in Christ who are courageous enough to call me to the mat when necessary. And I in turn need to be humble enough to hear it when it comes. If you're never willing to genuinely listen to criticism, eventually none will ever come because people can quickly discern when someone's pride has deafened their ears to anything other than what they already want to hear.

So where are you at in this regard? Do you think too highly of yourself? Or do you think of yourself with sober judgment? Maybe better yet, do you have people in your life who can and will challenge you and call you out when you step out of line? We live in a culture that almost encourages what is sometimes known as an “echo chamber,” where people surround themselves only with those who will affirm them and agree with them. If that's you, if you only allow those who agree with you to be close to you, then you're in a

dangerous place. Sober judgment often has to come from outside of ourselves, so we need to people who aren't wrapped up in our highly exalted opinion of ourselves to burst our ego bubble sometimes. We need fellow believers who know us well enough to recognize our sinful pride and call us out on it, and therefore we need the church. The local church is the team God has placed us on to help us get over our own self-deception that we're some kind of spiritual superstar and ground us in humility and grace.

So that's the first bit of coaching instruction we need to keep in mind: don't get such an exalted view of yourself that you think you're some kind of superstar. But the second point of coaching we need to hear from this passage is this...

## 2. Be a team player (v. 4-5)

Look back in your Bible now at v. 4-5. Drawing off of what he just said regarding not thinking too highly of yourself, Paul goes on to say this, **"For as 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."**

The reason we shouldn't think so highly of ourselves is because we need each other as Christians. The church is a team, not a one-man show. In basketball, you can't have Michael Jordan compete on the court all alone. You need the full team playing in order to win. Or in baseball, as important as the pitcher is, his team isn't going to get far without a catcher, a first baseman, and outfielders. Nor does it matter how good your quarterback's arm is unless he has people defending him and running backs to throw the ball to.

While those are all sport metaphors, the metaphor Paul uses to get this point across is the human body. He reminds us of the simple truth that we have one body composed of different members. I have eyes and ears, hands and feet, and each member has a different function. You can't use your feet to hear or your hands to see. This of course is not a difficult concept to comprehend. We all recognize that our physical bodies are made up of varying members that each have different functions but are essential to the well-being of the whole.

The point of this is to draw an analogy between how our bodies work and how the body of Christ works. The same principle holds true in the church: we are one body that is composed of many members, and each member has a different function within the body of Christ. So for example, in the church I have a significant speaking role. It's my responsibility to preach on Sunday and teach in other avenues during the week, as well as provide counsel. My role is a very verbal role within the church body. If we go with the body metaphor, my role is similar to a mouth. I have the responsibility to use words to teach and preach biblical truth.

But not everyone in this church body is gifted to be a speaker. Most of you wouldn't in a million years want to get up here and speak in front of everyone. You'd sooner get a root canal without nova cane than do any kind of public speaking. But that's okay. We don't all need to have the same gifts. I think of Dick Jensen who faithfully serves behind

the scenes here at church. He runs the sound ministry and is involved in all kinds of electrical and other facility-related operations. He's more of a hand within the body of Christ. He's gifted at works of service that benefit the church family and doesn't want to be up front. But I'm not gifted that way. I'm not a handy-man. I don't possess the kind of knowledge necessary to run the sound ministry successfully.

So the point is we need each other, but we don't all need to be like each other. Dick Jensen needs someone in the body of Christ to be the mouth and I need those who can be the hands. We need each other. He doesn't have my gifts and I don't have his, but together we can function and accomplish far more as a church working in harmony with one another than we could apart.

The upshot of this is we need to be team players, and what I mean by that is Christianity is not a solo endeavor. Notice again what Paul says in v. 5. **“So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”** Let that last phrase sink in for a moment. Each of us, as individuals, are members of one another. We are not our own. When Christ called us to himself, he called us to become members of the people of God, the church. You can't be a Christian and wing it off on your own. Your redeemed life has been called to join in interdependent community with other believers in the local church. If you are a member here, then you are on Team Grace Fellowship and that means you ought to be with us for our team meetings, as it were. You need to be here on Sunday. When your team gathers to pray and study God's Word and serve, that should include you. Be a team player. This church needs your gifts, talents, and experiences to be a strong, healthy church. But in order for that to happen, you have to be here. You need to gear up and get on the court when we play. The church doesn't need more benchwarmers; we need those who are all in, who want to contribute to our team and advance our cause for Christ.

That then brings us to the third bit of coaching instruction given in our passage which flows from our need to be a team player. In order to be a team player, you need to play. So our third point is this...

### 3. Get in the game (v. 6-8)

Christianity is a participation sport. You aren't supposed to sit on the bleachers and watch everyone else; you need to get in the game yourself. Look at just the beginning of v. 6 for a moment. Paul instructs us, **“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...”**

You been given gifts, granted to you by the grace of God, that have been given to be used for the benefit of the church. Therefore, Paul says, **“let us use them.”** Use them. Get in the game. Stop sitting on the bench. Every single Christian has something to contribute to the church. Some of those gifts will be very public gifts and others will be more quiet, behind-the-scene acts of service but no matter if your giftedness is big or small, public or private, you're to use whatever level of giftedness you have for the sake of the well-being of the body of Christ.

Paul then lists a number of gifts that Christians could possibly deploy in service of the church. Look back in your Bibles at v. 6-8. **“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in 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; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”**

There are two things in particular I want you to take note of about these verses. First, I want you to notice how Paul lists a variety of gifts here. These gifts all vary. Some are more public gifts, such as the gift of prophecy or teaching. There are other gifts that are far more quiet and behind-the-scenes, such as acts of service or contributing to the church financially. Some gifts are more personal and intimate, such as exhorting and doing acts of mercy. The point is Paul doesn't elevate any one gift above the others. This wide variety of gifts are part of God's blessing upon the church. He doesn't make us into cookie-cutter Christians. My gifts aren't your gifts and that's okay. You don't need to look like me any more than I need to look like you. We each have different roles to play within the church based upon our giftedness.

But the second and more important thing I want you to notice here is what Paul is telling us to do with our gifts. For everything he lists, he couples it by saying in effect, “Use it!” If you have the gift of prophecy, use it in proportion to your faith. If you're gifted in serving others, then find a way to serve. If you're good at teaching, then find a small group or a Sunday school class or volunteer with the children's church and teach. If you're good at exhorting and encouraging others, don't keep silent. Use your gift for building up the Body of Christ. If God has blessed you with wealth, then find ways to be generous with your money for the benefit of the church. If you're a good leader, then passionately pursue a role of leadership. If God has given you a tender heart towards the hurting and oppressed, then cheerfully go and do acts of mercy by visiting the sick or shut-in or others who are going through a difficult time in life.

You don't need a seminary degree to comprehend what Paul is saying to us here. To each and everyone of us, he's saying, “Get in the game, folks. The team needs you.” The church doesn't have superstars and it doesn't operate on the basis of one or two terrifically gifted individuals. It takes all of us to make this happen. The church is to be a community of the redeemed characterized by all kinds of people using all kinds of gifts to reflect the love of Christ in their lives. We belong to one another by God's design and therefore we need to be invested in each other's lives by contributing the gifts, talents, skills, and interests we each uniquely have for the benefit of the church and the glory of Christ our Lord.

So my friends here at Grace Fellowship church, are you in the game or are you sitting on the sidelines? Are you a player or a benchwarmer? Now I understand there are seasons of life when you get sidelined by sickness or other life events for a while. Just like an NBA athlete, there are going to be times when you'll need to rest and recover, when you need to heal. But barring those exceptional circumstances, you need to be in the game, serving with your gifts in the church. Grace Fellowship Church needs to have everyone who calls this their church home active in using their gifts.

I want to strongly encourage everyone here to commit yourself to using whatever it is God has gifted you with to serve our church body. No one who calls this their church home should be sitting on the bench. Everyone has something to contribute, even if to you it may seem small or insignificant. God doesn't give worthless gifts. Many areas of service are vital to our church that don't involve you being the up-front person. If you aren't currently serving in the church in some manner, talk to me or one of the elders and we'd be glad to help you determine how you can use your giftedness and talents for the sake of our church family.

## **Conclusion**

So let me tie this all together and say that the church has been given to us by God for our benefit and his glory. None of us should be arrogant and think too highly of ourselves and in so doing disregard the church. We need each other because we cannot worship God by being transformed by the renewal of our minds apart from the church. I cannot grow in my understanding of the Scripture apart from sitting under the regular preaching of the Word and learning from other believers who have studied it. I need to have other Christians around me to pray for me, to encourage me, to challenge me, to live as examples for me, if I'm to grow in discipleship. It will be next to impossible for me to see the blind spots of sin that still plague me without having deep relationships with fellow believers who can rebuke me with loving, sober judgment. I cannot forsake the church and try to go it alone and just listen to church services on TV or the radio because God has called me to use the gifts he has given me for the benefit of real flesh-and-blood people who I'm in community with on a weekly basis.

We are obligated to God to worship and serve him by worshipping along side other believers and serving them with our gifts and talents in the local church. So let's make sure we get in the game and use all that God has blessed us with for good of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ here at Grace Fellowship Church.

Please join me now as I close with a word of prayer. Let's pray.