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ALMIGHTY and merciful God, of whose only gift it cometh that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service; Grant, we beseech thee, that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life, that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Good Morning!

When we think of the word 'gifts', what comes to mind? Well, given the last few weeks, we probably imagine finely wrapped packages under some sort of evergreen tree, or held in a piece of hosiery.

Those are gifts, yes, but they are of the material kind, ones we can touch and handle.

In the first part of today's epistle, blessed Paul discusses the gifts we have been given by God. These gifts are not exactly the same as those we found at the end of Advent, but in many ways, they are far more precious.

The letter to the Romans was written to that fledgling church as an instruction guide. This chapter starts with the often-quoted verses about offering your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. The apostle then gets into how a follower of the Way (as they were known at the time) should live in the knowledge that God's grace has given us much in the way of gifts, and to live accordingly.

So, then, he goes on, if you have the gift of (fill in the blank), use it. God gave it to you to use for His glory.

The midpoint of the reading contains a simple message as well, and in the Elizabethan English of the Prayer Book, is quite unsubtle.

“Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good”

Sounds simple, right? If only it were. As I mentioned in my sermon last week, in considering the Old Testament and one series of passages from Deuteronomy, it all seemed so easy, why couldn't Israel understand what was needed? As I identified then,

distractions abound, and derail us at every turn. This is also what blessed Paul sought to guide the new church at Rome away from.

Consider that the people of the Way were a minority at the time.

They were growing in numbers, but most of Rome, as the center of the Empire was still steeped in the worship of a lot of gods, gods whose very nature were greedy and selfish.

Here, in this letter to a new church, Paul presents a God that is very, very different from what the Roman-on-the-street was used to - a God that reached down to us, one that gave of Himself to lift us up to Him. He gives us unmerited favor (another definition of grace) and offers us the finest gifts. What Paul starts with here is to tell the new Christian to use them as they were given.

In the second half of the reading, the apostle goes on to discuss how the believer is to behave in everyday life. Reading through the list of actions – Don't be selfish, be honorable in all you do, be enthusiastic in showing and acting on your faith- These segments

that discuss how we should deal with others call upon the Roman believer to extend the grace given to them, that unmerited favor, to the people around them by their words and actions. For the time, that was a stunning way to behave, because it was in many ways opposite of what that society taught as normal behavior.

And what of today, of the believer in twenty-first century America, that reads through this passage –where are they to go with these commands? We are pretty much in the same place as that Roman believer.

We live in a society, now, that worships the self, the impermanent. People rejoice and worship foolishness and temporary things and actions, rather than the God who provides.

We Christians are seen as oddities, as people with archaic and silly beliefs, who cling to an unseen God and read a book that makes little sense in an electronic world.

So, given this situation we find ourselves in, what do we do? There are churches, entire groups, that are choosing to change what they believe, and how they believe, in order to fit more neatly into this society. We all know of them, and some of us have come from those places of compromise.

The formula is deceptively simple – follow Him. The apostle Paul outlines how in this passage to that Roman church. Use the gifts He gives us, reject the evil, cling to the good, and live as described.

Throughout this passage, there is a undercurrent present “Focus on HIM, and your actions will speak to the world about Him, through you”

Those distractions I mentioned earlier are, as we all know, quite intentional, so we can lose that focus, and we can turn away from presenting His message that the world so keenly needs to hear.

And we know something else, that we **are** human, and we **will** stumble and lose focus. At those times, it is vital not to lose track, to lose faith. He is there. Always.

He knows our frailties, and that's why we have grace, that unearned, unmerited favor. The hand that is offered by another believer, that's a gift, a part of His perpetual grace.

And that is why blessed Paul wrote to the Roman church all those years ago – to shore them up, to encourage and instruct them, yes, but, also, to let them know that they were not alone, no, not one of them.

God is ever faithful, and God is good, all the time, every time!

Let us pray

LORD of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*