

Assessing Ourselves with Our God Assigned Measure of Faith

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of humility and faith in the Christian walk, focusing on the dangers of pride and the necessity of God-given faith to define and assess oneself. It delves into the varying degrees of faith experienced by individuals, the sovereignty of God in sustaining and growing faith, and the unity in diversity that comes from interdependence within the church.

Scripture: Romans 12:3, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Romans 14:1, Philippians 2:12, 1 Corinthians 15:10, Romans 15:5, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Peter 3:18

Topics: "Humility", "Faith and Interdependence in the Church"

Description

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Transcript

Would you pray with me? It is a terrifying and a wonderful cross that bids us come and die. And my prayer for us as we gather Sunday morning, Saturday evening, is that we would die with Jesus and be able to say to those we are responsible for, my life for yours. My life for yours, Noelle.

My life for yours, Talitha. My life for yours, Karsten and Shelley, Millie, Francis, Abel, Benjamin, Melissa, Abraham, Molly, and the two babies growing. My life for yours, Barnabas.

My life for yours, staff. My life for yours, elders. My life for yours, Bethlehem.

May we be able to say that, like Jesus said it, my life for yours, church. Lord, turn us upside down in America. We're self-exalting people.

We're proud to the core of our being. A broken and contrite heart is rare, and we long for it because that's what pleases you. So come and continue the wonderful work that you have been doing in the last 30 or 40 minutes.

Continue it. May our worship continue over the Word of God. Help me to be faithful to it, I ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. The last time we were together, we began our effort to explain the relationship between verse 2 and verse 3, and that verse 3 of Romans 12 is an opening, an unpacking, an explanation of the new mind, the renewed mind called for in verse 2. Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed in the renewing of your mind. Now what is this new mind like? What's it do? How does it think? That's what verse 3 begins to answer.

Let's read it. By the grace given to me, I say to every one of you, everyone among you, this is to everyone among you, nobody sitting in these rooms here that this does not apply to, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. So there's a danger.

I think the reason Paul starts with pride and the mind's understanding of itself in relation to God and other people is not because that's the most important thing the mind does, but that's the most dangerous thing the mind does. What you think about yourself cannot save you, but it can destroy you. So there's danger here, and therefore the verse begins with a warning.

Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Now that's exactly the opposite of the way American culture functions. In American culture, the exalting of the self is not perilous, it's profitable.

And especially among advertisers. So for example, about 200 yards from here, you go out, just look up as you drive out onto the freeway to the McDonald's billboard. Me, myself, my salad.

What is that? That's all it says. We know exactly what it is. That's who we want to be.

The center of things. Exalted. Me, myself, my salad.

That's the American way. To be a Christian is to be very anti-American at this point. Advertisers, educators, counselors, human resource managers, coaches, politicians, and pastors will give an account someday for how they have exploited the suicidal tendency of the human being toward pride.

So if you're in any of those roles, or anything similar, mark it down. Do you make hay with the bent of your people toward wanting to be made mucha? Paul does exactly the opposite, as you can see. He does what love demands.

He warns against the suicidal tendency. Let's read it again. I say, this is verse 3, I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.

In other words, the first task of the new mind, of verse 2, the first task of the new mind, of verse 2, is the obliteration of pride and the cultivation of humility. That's remarkable. I mean, there's so many things he could have said about the mind, and he will have more to say, but there is where he starts.

What's new about the renewed mind is that pride is put to death and humility begins to grow. And then comes the second half of the verse, the positive alternative to the inflated view of ourselves. Let's read that now.

But, to think with sober judgment, that's the alternative to an inflated view of yourself, to think with sober judgment each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. And so last time we asked, Paul, what are you trying to accomplish by making the God-given measure of faith that each person has the

standard of their self-assessment? What are you trying to do? What do you accomplish by saying you want to think soberly, justly, rightly, and with discernment about yourself, the meaning of yourself, the value of yourself, the significance of yourself, the esteem of yourself. You want to think soberly about that? Make the God-given measure of faith you have the standard by which you define and assess yourself.

What are you trying to accomplish by saying that? And I said there are four answers to that question. I gave you two answers last week. I'm going to give one answer today, and then we will use the fourth answer, Lord willing, next week to build a bridge into the teaching about the gifts and the body of Christ.

So all we're going to do is answer one more question tonight, but let me review where we are going. So there were two answers last week, and here they are. First, Paul would say, I think, the reason that I am making your God-given measure of faith the standard by which you define and assess yourself is because faith is the unique act of the soul that looks away from itself to Christ and treasures him as infinitely valuable, infinitely worthy, infinitely significant, infinitely worthy of esteem, and thus calls all attention to him.

When faith stands in front of a mirror, the mirror becomes a window behind which it sees the beauty and glory of Christ and savors what it sees. Faith can't survive in front of a mirror. It must turn it into a window.

And in totally going out from itself and embracing as all- embracing the Christ, it becomes what God made it to be. The measure of your new self in Christ, the new mind, is the degree to which you look away from yourself to Christ as your treasure. If Christ is more to you, you are more.

If Christ is less to you, you are less. Your value consists in your valuing Christ. Your esteem consists in your esteeming Christ above all things.

Your significance consists in your counting Christ more significant than anything in the universe. That was answer number one. Answer number two.

Paul, why are you making faith and its God-given measure the means by which we define and assess ourselves so that we think soberly and rightly? Answer number two. Because faith is a divine gift of God and therefore eliminates boasting. It's a gift.

Let's read that. I don't want you to think I'm making that up. Romans 12, 3, second half of the verse.

Think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. Therefore, no Christian can boast over a non-Christian as though we have achieved anything by our wisdom, our virtue, or our strength. We didn't.

If that's the reason you give to Jesus when he asks you at the gate, why did you believe in me and your brother didn't? I was wiser, smarter, and more virtuous. That's the wrong answer and you will be in big trouble. Faith doesn't talk that way.

Faith knows better by grace. T'was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed? I did not appear precious the hour I first believed.

Grace appeared precious because it made me afraid. It brought conviction of sin and it took it away by faith. Then I give God all the glory.

Run, John, run. The law demands but gives us neither feet nor hands. Far better news the gospel brings.

It bids us fly and gives us wings. That's John Bundy. He knew it well.

He was such a sinner. His only hope. So my second answer is that all boasting, and we've just sung it in so many good ways, I don't need to linger on this one.

All boasting is gone for those who know where their faith came from. Alright, here we are and I have one more answer to give to the question. Paul, what are you trying to accomplish by telling me to stop thinking too highly of myself but to think with sober judgment, namely to make my faith and its God-given measure the standard by which I assess and define myself? What are you trying to accomplish by saying that? Answer number three.

God assigns faith in different proportions to His people because it produces humble interdependence with all of us serving and being served, which leads to a unity in diversity which is more difficult and more beautiful and more God-glorifying than if everybody had exactly the same measure of faith. If you come to this text, verse 3, especially the end of the verse, with the assumption that you are an autonomous, ultimately self-determining center of consciousness in the universe, this text will blow the circuits of your brain. The Bible does not have that assumption.

Let's read it again. Verse 3, second half of the verse. Think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

And they're different. They're different between everybody in this room right now and they're different in everybody in this room from hour to hour. My guess is after a worship time in song like that, your faith level is higher than it was at 10 o'clock this morning.

So I have three questions to ask about that question, that answer. Number one, do we experience faith in different degrees? I don't want to assume it or even assume that that text teaches it, though I think it's pretty plain that it does. Number two, does it help us or hurt us to know that ultimately this diversity is God's doing? Does that get in the way? Does that make matters worse or better? To know that high faith, low faith, strong faith, weak faith is God's doing.

Third question, why does God ordain diversity of faith when He commands strong faith? Should we go back three messages and pick up the sovereignty of God and the will of command? So those are my three questions to occupy the rest of our time together. So let's take number one. Do we experience faith in different degrees between each other and in our own experience from time to time? I think experience is indisputable on this, though experience is not our authority.

Let's just start there anyway. You know good and well that your faith is sometimes bigger and sometimes smaller. If faith, let's just go back and make sure we get the definition, if faith is a looking away from yourself through the window behind which is the glory of Christ and all of His perfections and all of His offices of prophet and priest and king and sacrifice executed in infinitely perfect degree and all of His ways and works revealed in the Bible behind the window is shining through the glory of Christ and faith sees through the window, reaches out, embraces that, savors that to its soul's satisfaction.

You know you do that more sometimes than not. That's a given. I mean just no way anybody could dispute that.

Like the only people that I can imagine disputing that faith happens in degrees in your own soul and happens in degrees in the church are people who define faith so mechanically it has no living pulsing

responsiveness to Jesus. It's just a fact and I say yes and my yes is always the same. Yes.

If you can disconnect faith from all the living dynamic of responding to Jesus, which of course you cannot, that's just not what faith is in the New Testament, then I think experience is undeniable here, but it's not our authority so let's go to the Bible. Second Thessalonians 1.3 goes like this. We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

Crystal clear. Faith should be bigger tomorrow than it was yesterday. That's the way God wants it to be and he was so happy to celebrate that the Thessalonians are stronger, richer, deeper in faith today than they were a few weeks ago.

And may it always be so for us as a church. Or here's a closer analogy or text. Romans 14.1. We're gonna get there, Lord willing, someday.

And it says, As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him. What's that mean? As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him. You who are strong should bear with the failings of the weak.

Some are strong, some are weak, and that very role may reverse six months later. This is why I said it begets an interdependence in the church of being served and serving. That's my answer to the first one.

Yes, we do experience faith in different degrees. Here's second question. Does it help us or hurt us to know that this diversity in our own soul from time to time and in the church among each other, does it help us or hurt us? Does it get in the way to know this is God's doing? Now, let's read that again, lest you think I'm bringing that here.

Verse 3, middle of the verse. Think with sober judgment each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. Nothing static about that necessarily.

Where you are tonight is ultimately God's doing, big or little, believer, unbeliever. Now, there are many objections to this teaching. I'll deal with one, most practical one.

Namely, if God ultimately governs if I believe and how much I believe, then the fight of faith becomes pointless. There's the objection. You hear it over and over again on many scores in the Bible.

Here's my response to that objection. It's not true. It's false.

If God is sovereign and he can bring those who are dead in trespasses and sins to living faith, if God is sovereign and can bring Peter from the clutches of the devil after three denials back to useful faith, the sovereignty of God does not make the fight of faith pointless. It makes it possible, and only this makes it possible. It isn't true that God's sovereignty and mercy and awakening and sustaining and recovering and bringing back makes the fight of faith pointless.

This is not true. It makes it possible. The problem with this objection, here's the flaw.

The problem with that objection is that it assumes I bring to faith and unbelief, strong and weak, a neutral, a relatively neutral heart. It assumes a relative neutrality in me from which I can make myself a believer or an unbeliever, make myself a strong person or a weak person, when the Bible's assumption is not neutrality but depravity. There's the difference.

If you start with the assumption, I'm not neutral. I hate God and I'm a stone towards him. I have no affections toward him.

He is boring. If you start with the assumption, I'm hard. I'm blind.

I'm dead. I'm rebellious. I don't have a spiritual bone in my body.

I just want to get out of here and go watch television. If you start there, then you see where I'm coming from when I say the sovereignty of God that can break in on that and give it softness and tenderness and openness so that it sees the irresistible beauty of Jesus Christ and thus embraces him. That truth does not make the fight of faith pointless.

It makes it possible, and only that makes it possible. Those who think according to the Bible and have faith don't say things like, well, if God is sovereign over my faith and he decides whether I have strong faith or weak faith, there's no point in me praying or reading the Bible. They don't talk like that.

You know how they talk? I'll read you the way they talk. Philippians 2.12. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to do his good pleasure. God's willing and doing his good pleasure in your life does not make your working pointless.

It makes it possible. Or they talk like this. 1 Corinthians 15.10. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them. Nevertheless, it was not I but the grace of God that is with me. The powerful grace of God enabling Paul to work harder than anybody didn't make his work pointless.

It made his work possible. But if you come with the assumption of neutrality, if you come with the assumption of autonomy, if you come with the assumption of ultimate self-determination, this is meaningless talk. If you come tonight desperate, knowing that without the intervention of Almighty God into your heart, your stone toward him, this will be gospel.

For those of us, I speak very personally here, who know how fickle and fragile our wills are, it is a great comfort and a great confidence that our covenant God pledges himself to sustain our faith. I don't know how anybody who doesn't believe this survives. Frankly, I think all believers do act as though this is true, even if they say with their mouth they don't believe it.

I am sure that he who began a good work in you will complete it till the day of Christ. Where does that come from? That's my only hope. I love to ask you, I love to ask you, what makes you think you're gonna wake up a believer tomorrow morning? Your cock-sure autonomy? We're up, we're down, we're sad, we're happy, we're discouraged, we're hopeful, our emotions are everywhere.

What makes you think that you will pluck yourself up out of the pit of despair when it comes, that you'll always have the resources? You won't in yourself. There's only one reason you're gonna wake up a believer tomorrow morning. God wakes you up a believer.

He who began a good work in you will complete it. He brought you from the dead, Peter, Simon, Simon. I prayed for you.

When you turn, strengthen your brothers. I won't let you fall utterly. Deny me, I will let you go there.

I will let you go there, but I won't let you fail. That's precious. So when the disciples in Luke 17, 5, say to Jesus, Lord, increase our faith.

Jesus does not say, that's your work. He doesn't say that. That's a good prayer, and you should pray it every day of your life.

Preserve, I pray that a lot, preserve my faith, keep me pure, keep me believing, keep me trusting. If you don't answer that prayer, I am a goner. And therefore, prayer is not pointless.

It's a means that God has chosen in His sovereignty to accomplish what He intends to accomplish. Or, it's not pointless for you to take up your Bible and read. It's not pointless of you to listen to a Bible-saturated exhortation from a Christian counselor.

It's not pointless for you to sit where you're sitting under the preaching of God's Word. These are not pointless activities as though God's going to do everything He's going to do, whether you do those or not. He won't.

These are chosen means appointed by God to bring about a strengthening of faith which He ordained before the foundation of the world. You are not here tomorrow morning or tonight by accident. It is God's grace that brought you under this communion table, brought you with those songs, and brought you under this message.

That is all divine work to accomplish something for the sake of your faith. He has a plan for your faith. My answer to the second question is, yes, it is helpful to know these things.

It does not get in the way. It is life. It's my lifeline to know that the diversity of faith in the church and the ups and downs of the faith of my life are the work of a sovereign, covenant, gracious God who will get me through and who will use my weaknesses to exploit the strengths of others in love for me and use my strengths to make me a lover to the weak.

Last question. Why does God ordain diversity of faith in the church when His revealed will is Ephesians 6.10, be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might, and yet He wills that some from time to time be weak? Why? It may not be for us to know, but I think it is. I think part of the answer is given.

So let me give the part that I think I see. I'm sure there are parts that I don't see. I think God's always doing a thousand things I don't see.

Every act He makes, a thousand effects I can't even begin to imagine, which is wonderful to dream about. Your life is not in vain. Though you may see two effects of it, there are ten thousand effects that you don't see.

They're all being videoed and will be shown in heaven someday. I really believe that. It'll be a kind of video you have never imagined, but we will all celebrate the effects of your life.

Okay, here's the part of the answer I think I understand. It comes from Romans 15.5. Listen to this, or you can turn over a couple of pages. Romans 15.5. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another.

He's just coming out of a chapter in which he's talking about strong and weak, strong and weak. Receive the weak, you are strong. So he's talking about harmony now.

Grant that we have the same mind and we live in harmony with one another in accord with Jesus. Here's the goal. That together you may with one voice, the weak and the strong, with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So my answer, the part I think I understand, is that God ordains diversity not only of gifts, which we'll see next week, but of faith because the unity in diversity that comes from interdependence and serving back and forth and being served, that reality is more difficult, more beautiful, and therefore more God-glorifying than if we all had cookie-cutter faith. Think of it this way. In 1 Thessalonians 5, 14, we read this.

This is especially good for us leaders, but it really applies to everybody. We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. Now have you ever thought that those four beautiful acts of love could not exist if there were no idle, no faint-hearted, no weak, and no irascible person who requires much patience? You ever thought about that? The beauty of admonishing the idle, the beauty of encouraging the faint-hearted, the beauty of helping the weak, the beauty of being patient with them all would be impossible if nobody needed those acts of love.

God has ordained otherwise. He gives different measures of faith. He starts with us in our natural depravity, dead, and he brings us life.

And then there's this gravitational pull of the old nature, the indwelling sin is always at work. And God, like for Peter, and like so many times in the Old Testament, restore us, O God, and we will return to you. It's an amazing statement.

Lamentations 5, 1, for example, the Hebrew phrase for restore is a form of the verb that says, cause us to return and we will return. That's the way they pray. That's why saints pray, cause us to return and we will return.

So let me close with three summary exhortations. Number one, from experience and from the Bible we have learned faith grows, and by implication faith can decay, and therefore we're moving around on this map all the time. Therefore, do not be surprised or resentful of the diversity of faith in this church or in your own life.

I choose my words carefully. Do not be surprised or resentful. There are some things you should feel about weakness.

Those two are not they. That's number one. Number two, we learn from the Bible that we sinners left to ourselves, our faith will only decay, and it would perish if God left us to ourselves.

And therefore, rejoice that God does not leave us to ourselves, but he is at work in us to will and to do is good pleasure. That you believe at all and that you will be a believer tomorrow morning is certain for one ultimate reason. God is sovereign and God is merciful.

That's your only hope, to be and to stay a believer. Third and lastly, let us never be content with low, weak faith, since God commands. It's not our business to make sure that some people stay weak in the church, because Jesus is going to design it that way.

That is not your business. You are not God. Your duty is defined by God's command, not by God's sovereignty.

And your duty is, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might, and look at all the means that God has provided for you to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus, 2nd Peter 3.18. So, nevertheless, let us turn every weakness and every strength into a beautiful occasion to serve and be served according to the God-given measure of faith assigned. Lord, I pray that you would make us servants and humbly willing to be served. Sometimes we have resources abounding to bless another, and sometimes we feel so bankrupt, weak, and needy.

This is a golden opportunity for the church to be the church. Exhort the idle. Be patient with them all.

Help the weak. Build up the faint-hearted. Lord, I pray that all of us would be pushing forward to strength upon strength, and that we would not resent it, nor be surprised when our life has its ups and downs, and when this church, individually and corporately, has its ups and downs.

Oh, make us stable, strong, able to weather the changes that come. I ask this in Jesus' name.

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