



ROSE
HILL
CHURCH

Romans 12:1-8
People: The Secret of Greatness
Gifted for Giving

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Last week we began a new series of message looking at the lives of a few people who have been impacted by Jesus, and how they, in turn, impacted others. We began with Jackie Robinson, one of the best-known names in American sports, and today we step back in time to a couple hundred years earlier, to look at a woman who's name is probably less recognizable for most of us, yet without her efforts and others along with her, Jackie Robinson's efforts might never have been possible.

Hannah More was a British poet, playwright, and author who used her gifts to bring about education for boys and girls in the working class, and she also played a key role in the abolishment of slavery in England in the 1830's. In his book, *7 Women And The Secret of Their Greatness*, Eric Metaxas writes, **“More was nothing less than the most influential woman of her time”** (Eric Metaxas, *7 Women And The Secret of Their Greatness*, p. 59).

Hannah was born on February 2nd, 1745, the last of 5 girls. Her father was a schoolmaster at a school in the village of Fishponds, where she was born and raised, just outside Bristol, west of London about 2 ½ hours by car today. From an early age she took to reading and writing, requesting scarce and expensive paper for her birthday every year so she could write more.

She wrote her first play in 1763 at the age of 18. It was titled, *The Search After Happiness*, and was performed by the girls at an all-girls school that one of her older sisters had started, and where Hannah had started working at age 16. One of the primary motivating factors to write it was to give the girls something to act out that was appropriate for their ages. Not only was it greatly entertaining, but it also had a moral aspect to it that was lacking from similar plays at the time. Her play was well-received, and that encouraged her to write more of them. Even though her family was not well off, she eventually found herself in some of the socially elite circles of Bristol, and by age 29, she was beginning to get connected with people like that in London, as well. Soon, her plays, poems, books, and pamphlets were among the best-selling. In fact, her works at the time outsold Jane Austen 10 to 1.ⁱ

By 1780, when she was 36, she started to become disenchanted with the social-elite and high society of London, with which she had become well-connected. She began to return to her Christian faith that had underpinned much of what she had done and written, but was sort of assumed, and running in the background of her life. Instead, at about this time, she began to embrace her faith more wholeheartedly. In doing this, she felt a great tug-of-war inside her. And she wondered if she needed to give up on the friends and relationships and connections she had in the London theater and high society circles because of the contradictions she sensed with her faith. Eventually, though she left London physically, she remained close with many of her friends in those circles. Eric Metaxas writes, **“Hannah would indeed leave London, but it was her ability to be friends with these people with whom she disagreed that set her apart...and that would make her singularly effective as an agent of cultural change...She did not wish to retreat from culture into a religious sphere, but rather to advance with the wisdom and truth of religion into the cultural sphere”** (*7 Women... p. 69-70*).

This was crucial to how God would work through her in the future. She was inspired in her faith by John Newton, the former slave ship captain turned minister in the Church of England who wrote the song, “Amazing Grace.” She finally met him when she was 43 and that same year she met William Wilberforce, an English politician who came to be the chief champion of abolition. But he needed more than just other government officials to make abolition happen. He needed someone who could influence the culture...who could touch people’s hearts with why abolishing slavery was necessary and worth the economic risks that most people perceived were too great. Hannah More was the woman for the job.

She wrote articles and pamphlets that were published for the masses, and books that were aimed at the social elite. She had a way of saying hard things to people such that they would be generally accepted, even by those to whom she was directing her words. So, for instance, she wrote a book titled, *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* where: **She addressed those of “the more decent class” who “acknowledged their beliefs of**

[religion’s] truth by a public profession, and are not inattentive to any of its forms, yet exhibit little of its spirit in their general temper and conduct” (Hannah More, *Complete Works*, p. 275).ⁱⁱ In one three year stretch beginning in 1795, she wrote, and oversaw the writing by others, a number of pamphlets – at the rate of three per month that were sold inexpensively and written for all to be able to understand. This kind of pamphlet was all the rage, With Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* being particularly well-known and easily accessible. He lived in France at the time, and the French Revolution was in full force. Much of his writing was against religion, and sought to “undermine, not only religious establishments, but good government, by the alluring vehicles of novels, short stories, and songs.”ⁱⁱⁱ Hannah felt that the Christian faith was essential to having good government and a good society. She specifically tried to influence English society and appeal to the Christian faith in regards to slavery...to encourage people to see these slaves as humans who were created in the image of God just like anyone else...and to see their humanity as a reason to change cultural attitudes in regards to slavery, which would eventually help lead to changes at level of their laws.

Slowly, things began to shift. They began chipping away at the laws through bits and pieces of legislation and through the shift in culture that came about thanks to Hannah More and others too. For instance, in 1807, a law was passed that outlawed the slave trade. And then finally, on August 28, 1833, four weeks after William Wilberforce died, British Parliament passed legislation that abolished slavery. Their hard work had paid off. With the knowledge that all her efforts had finally seen success, Hannah passed away just a few weeks later, on September 7th, 1833, at the age of 88.

And as I reflect on her life, there are a host of Bible passages that come to mind. I don’t know if these were ones that John Newton or other Christian leaders highlighted for her to consider in regards to how she used her talents and gifts, but they come to my mind. The first is the passage from Romans we read earlier.

Paul writes in verse 2: **Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test**

and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:2). This is exactly what Hannah wrestled with when she was starting to have misgivings about the values of the London high society she had become a part of. Her faith challenged her about whether or not she was conforming to the patterns of the world. And her mind, how she thought about the culture around her, is what got transformed. Her mind was renewed. And as God worked on her and her mind was transformed, then she became open to God’s will in regards to her own life and how God was going to work through her. So, our openness to God starts with a mental renewal, and Hannah is a great example of what Paul writes.

Then, after writing about the unity we all have in Christ, and comparing the Church to a body, Paul goes into some of the differences in the body of Christ, and explains that those differences are needed just as a body needs different parts. **And the differences are the gifts of grace that God has given each of us: prophecy, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, and compassion.** This is not a complete list of the gifts that God gives – there are others listed in 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and a couple other places. But this gives us an idea of the kinds of gifts that God gives us for the building up of the body of Christ.

Most of these listed here we probably can kind of get our minds around; we can generally understand what these are and how they fit in with the ministry of the Church. The one that maybe throws us for a loop is the gift of prophecy. Biblically speaking, prophecy is primarily not about predicting the future, but about calling God’s people back to God’s will and ways. All the Old Testament prophets – Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Joel, and so forth – didn’t so much predict the future, though there are elements of that. . . **But mostly the Biblical prophets reflected on the present state of God’s people and said, “Hey, this is how we’ve gotten sideways with God, and here’s what we need to do to get back in line with His will.”** That’s what Biblical prophecy is all about. Being a prophet is a hard calling, because it’s raising people’s awareness of sin, rebellion, and straying from God’s good and perfect plans for His people. It’s saying things to people that they may not want to hear, but if they’re willing to hear it and think about it, and have their minds renewed in how they think about it, then they can be transformed in

how they live.

And I think that's actually the gift that Hannah had – or at least, one of the gifts that she had. She was able to help open up the collective eyes of British society to see that this evil of slavery was a societal sin that they were all participating in, and that a change was needed. It was a hard thing to say. It wasn't popular for the most part. But it needed to be said, and she was able to do so in a way that a lot of people came around to agree with her. And when her efforts were combined with the efforts of others, this amazing and godly change was brought about as slavery came to an end. All of them working together, with their different gifts, but functioning as one body, brought about the change that was needed. They each had a different role to play – William Wilberforce on the political side, Hannah More on the social side, and others along with them. But together they worked as one to get their message out into the world.

And that gets me to the second thought I want to share with you, and this comes from Jesus' prayer in John 17. He prays for the disciples, which seems in particular to be for the 12 disciples, but still extends to all who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus prays, **“My prayer is not that you [Heavenly Father] take them [the disciples] out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:15-18.)**

Hannah really wrestled with staying engaged with the high society friends she had made in her heyday as a playwright and during her years in London. But had she completely severed those relationships and become a kind of religious hermit, she never would have had the network of people that she needed to bring about the change. It was because of her relationship with them that they respected her and would listen to what she said. She really was in the world but not of it.

And it's a tricky balance sometimes. Where one person draws the line might be in a different place than for another. There are people who have brought people to know Jesus as Lord and Savior because they started a ministry in bars. And for some Christians, (more true a number of years ago

than now, I think) just setting foot in a place like that is being “of” the world. There are others, too: Is it being “of” the world or “in” the world to host a Super Bowl party? How about to participate in Halloween festivities...or shop at certain stores that support causes or have labor practices that might not align with our Christian faith? Where is the line drawn?

I’ve had two ministry ideas that could definitely blur the line between being “in the world” and being “of the world” for some folks. The first idea is to start some kind of a skiing ministry. I could live in a ski town, ski every day, and use that as a platform to reach skiers with the love of Jesus. Having been a ski bum for 20 months, I know firsthand that it’s a demographic that needs Jesus; but to be effective, it would have to come from someone who’s like them, who’s also a ski bum. It’s a tough job...and someone ought to do it...and I would be happy to make that sacrifice for the cause of Christ and be a ski bum with a mission to share the love of Jesus. I’ve always thought of skiing as the third sacrament after baptism and communion, because every time I crash, I’m reminded that I’m washed white as snow. However, I’ve had a hard time convincing anyone – including myself – that my motivation would be pure and I’d really only be “in” the world and not “of” it.

The second is an idea I’ve had for nearly 20 years: to start a radio station...playing rock and roll music...and nowadays this would be easier to do as an online kind of thing...but the idea is to play both secular music – including stuff that is decidedly non-Christian but is what a lot of people listen to – to play both that and Christian music, side by side, not distinguishing one from the other, with the aim of touching people’s lives with the hope of Jesus that is present in the Christian music. I appreciate that we have Christian radio stations...but why are they always completely divorced from the music that the non-Christian world is listening to? Why not merge them together as a way of being in the world...of bringing Jesus into culture? I once happened to share that idea with a guy when I was in seminary and he was asking me about what I might do. And when I told him about this idea, he said to me, “If you ever get that going, let me know, and I’ll help fund it.” Unfortunately, I have absolutely zero radio station experience.

All that to say: **There are various ways to be in the world, shining the light of Jesus, using the gifts that God has given us, for the purpose of building up the body of Christ and of taking the message of Jesus out into the world.** That's true whether you're here on the Eastside, in Mexico, Uganda or somewhere in between. Each of us here has spiritual gifts that God has given us, and it's just a matter of following the Spirit of God and exercising those gifts in a way that blesses the body of Christ, the Church, in it's mission and ministry. You could be the next Hannah More. And it doesn't have to be on this grand, society-wide scale like it was for her. You could be one to use the gifts that God has given you to touch even just a few people's lives in a profound way, like John Newton impacted Hannah More. She wouldn't have become who she was, if not for a particular hour-long conversation that the two of them had the first time they met.

So: what are the gifts that God has given you? How is God working through you and the gifts He's given you, to glorify Jesus, to build up the church, to be in the world and bring Jesus into the world? There's no time like the present to use them to build up the body of Christ...to help the church be in the world...to shine the light of Jesus. God has put you where you are for a reason and a purpose. May Hannah More be an example and an inspiration for all of us, as the Church, the whole body of Christ works together using all the gifts that God has given us. Let's pray....Amen.

ⁱ Eric Metaxas, *7 Women And The Secret of Their Greatness*, p. 59.

ⁱⁱ You can read the book here:

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=ZMEzAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA275>. It's page 263 in Google's numbering system, but 275 in book itself, which is scanned into electronic form.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More*, 1:455, quoted by Eric Metaxas in *7 Women...*, p. 79.