

CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: BUILDING A CHURCH THAT HONORS GOD AND LOVES PEOPLE BY BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST

Romans 12: 1-8

INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago, Ben Martin introduced me to one of his neighbors who was a professor over at UW Rock County. I think he taught Philosophy. Ben helped him build a model of the first atomic bomb that was dropped by the U.S. Air Force on Hiroshima, Japan to end WWII. He used the model in one of his classes. Ben invited me to the college to show me the model after it was completed. It was about the size of a refrigerator tipped on its side only it was a cylinder, not a rectangular box. It didn't look very intimidating or powerful at all. I remember thinking how amazing it was that something that seemed so harmless and small could release so much power and bring so much destruction as did that bomb. I don't understand the physics behind atomic bombs but I do know that first atomic bomb destroyed a city of several hundred thousand people in one horrifying moment. What appeared of little consequence was the most powerful device ever built by man up to that point in history. The atomic bomb is the power of man for the destruction of men.

In Romans 1:16, the apostle Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." The gospel of Jesus Christ contains a power more remarkable than that contained in any atomic bomb. Paul says that this simple message of God coming to earth to save sinners through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's power at work saving every sinner who believes. The book of Romans is Paul's description of the "physics" of the gospel. It is his analysis of how it is that God unleashes his saving power through the good news about Jesus. We are diving into Paul's description of that power in the twelfth chapter. That means we are skipping over 11 chapters of detailed explanation of the gospel. In those first eleven chapters Paul describes with beautiful detail the wonders of God's salvation of sinners. It is a description of how God has done the most impossible thing in the universe. He has, through Christ, made a way for sinful humans to dwell in the presence of a holy and just God without being consumed by his wrath and without defaming God as an unjust God for rewarding criminals like us with heaven rather than justly punishing us with hell.

The "therefore" in verse 1 connects what Paul is about to say with what he has said in the first eleven chapters. Because God's power has gone off in your life through the gospel, this is how you should live. Whereas the first 11 chapters were description of what God has done to save us, chapters 12-15 are a description of the visible effects this gospel has in our lives. He begins, in 12:1, to describe the effect the gospel has when it "goes off" in an individual's life. Paul describes, the kind of lifestyle that characterizes those whom he saves through Christ. He is describing the subjective experience of all those whom God has objectively saved through Christ.

I want you to note how careful Paul is to show that the way Christians live is due to God's grace, not due to their effort. First, in verse 1 he says that he is urging these Christians to offer their bodies to God "by the mercies of God." In other words, he is saying that he is a Christian, he is an apostle and he is writing to them because of the multitude of mercies that God has showered upon him. Additionally he is saying that the only reason they will do what he commands is "by the mercies of God." Second, in v. 2 he commands them to "be transformed in the renewing of their minds." The verb "be transformed" is a passive verb. Paul doesn't say "transform your minds by renewing them." That means that they, the Christians in Rome, are being acted upon by God to transform them. They don't transform themselves, God is the one who transforms them. Third, in v. 3 Paul again says that the reason he is addressing them is because God has graciously transformed him from one who hates Jesus and Christians to one who labors to serve Christ and help Christians. Fourth, at the end of v. 3 he tells these Christians that God is the one who has given them the faith that they possess. Faith is a gift of God's grace, not a work of human beings. Fifth, in v. 6 Paul tells these Christians that the gifts they possess are due to God's unmerited favor. God made them a member of Christ's body and gave them a role in that body,

not because of anything they ever did but simply because it pleased him to do so. Paul is demonstrating, in these 8 verses, what physical, visible, experiential effects the gospel has in the lives of those whom God saves.

MAIN POINT

The reality and power of the good news about Jesus is displayed in a people who...

I. Live all of life in God's presence (v. 1)

In v. 1 Paul is using the language of the OT sacrificial system to show one of the effects that God's mercies have in the lives of his people. It was the job of the priests to take the animals that the people brought to them and to kill them and place them on the altar as a sacrifice to God. Paul says, every Christian is both the priest who offers the sacrifice to God and he or she is the sacrifice. (This is a creative way of saying what Jesus says in Luke 9:23-26) What we offer is our physical bodies. At the end he says that this offering of our bodies to God is our worship. What does this mean?

The offering of the sacrifices by the Jewish people is what they did to worship God. It was the physical evidence that could be seen in the world that they were God's people. It wasn't only the sacrifices that showed they belonged to God. The temple, circumcision of baby boys at 8 days old, the food laws, the Sabbath laws, all these physical acts were the evidence that they belonged to God. In the first eleven chapters Paul showed that Jesus has accomplished for us everything that those sacrifices and priests and temple were meant to do for the Jewish nation. As he says in Romans 10:4, "Christ is the end of the law." The people of God are not now known by their offering of animal sacrifices because Jesus is our sacrifice. We are not known by our priests, for Jesus is our priest. We are not known as the people of God by our being circumcised because the Holy Spirit has circumcised our hearts. We have no physical temple because we are the temple of God. So what is there that distinguishes the people of God from all other people in this physical world that we live in? It is how we use our physical bodies.

It is through our physical bodies that we carry out our intentions and purposes. What we do with these bodies shows what we love, desire, fear, hate, admire, hope for, trust in, etc. Paul tells us that the effect of the gospel is shown in us by our giving ourselves, mind and body to God. This also shows that the reality of our profession of Christ is seen not simply in what we do in our "religious" moments, like coming to church, but in how we use our bodies all the time. We live in our bodies every moment and so we show the effects of grace in our lives all the time, in everything that we do. This is another way of saying what Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:30, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God."

The command to offer our bodies as a sacrifice to God is followed by four descriptions of what kind of a sacrifice we are to be. A living sacrifice means that we offer ourselves as long as we live in this body. It points to the daily, continual offering of our bodies to God. A holy sacrifice means that our bodies are owned by God and are to be used for his purposes. An acceptable sacrifice means that the use of our bodies conforms to God's written standards. We use our bodies for the things God tells us to use them for, not simply for the things we find acceptable. Finally, Paul concludes by saying that this offering of our bodies to God is the logical and necessary response to the gospel. Everyone who says, "I am a Christian", but who does not offer his or her body to God, is lying.

Right now, Scott Martin is applying to Marquette University. Let's say he is accepted to the school and offered a significant scholarship. He signs the papers saying that he is going to go to school there in the fall. For the next eight months, he tells us how excited he is to go to Marquette. However, when September rolls around, Scott continues to live in his parent's home and to work at Walden Books. He doesn't go to Marquette. Yet, he continues to tell us how excited he is to be a Marquette University student. We all know that simply saying you are a Marquette University student doesn't make you one. Just because you were accepted and you signed the papers doesn't make you one. You have to offer your body to Marquette by moving, going to class, doing the work, passing the tests. That's what Paul is saying here. Every person upon whom God showers his saving

mercies offers their body to God, a sacrifice, living, holy, acceptable to God, this is the logical and necessary act of worship that we perform that proves we are the people of God.

The reality of the grace of God given through Jesus is displayed in a people who...

➤ *Live all of life in God's presence*

➤ *And who...*

II. Delight in the will of God (v. 2)

The next effect of the gospel that Paul describes has to do with our relationship to the culture that we live in. He commands us to not be conformed to the pattern of this age. In the OT the people of God distinguished themselves from the surrounding cultures in a variety of ways. They didn't eat the same kinds of food that the non-Jewish people ate. They didn't have idols that they worshipped. They had one central temple, not scores of "holy sites" where the gods were worshipped. The physical requirements of who could worship God were very different from the surrounding cultures. Their sexual ethics were radically different. How they treated women and slaves was very different. Repeatedly the Jewish nation is commanded by God not to be like the other nations that live around them. They are commanded to be a people set apart to God. Paul has shown, in the first eleven chapters that most of the religious symbols of distinction between Jews and non-Jews have ended with the coming of Jesus because he is the fulfillment of all these symbols. However, there is still a necessary distinction that the people of God are to have from the surrounding, non-Christian culture. We use our bodies differently than the surrounding culture. We don't conform the use of our bodies to the way the culture uses its bodies.

The connection between vv. 1 & 2 is very important. As I said, how we use our bodies reveals what we love, hate, trust, admire. If he only said v. 1 and the first part of v. 2, we would end up with a legalistic, rule oriented religion. However, the second half of v. 2 shows us that the non-conforming use of our bodies is due to the transformation of our minds. In other words, we use our bodies differently than the surrounding culture because we think differently than the culture we live in. We view reality differently than this age of men and so we use our bodies differently. We think differently and so we live differently. We are changed from the inside out, not like the religious systems of men, which establish external standards to which people must conform. (Let me note that mind does not simply refer to what I think but also to what I value or love. Mind refers to my desires, thoughts, beliefs, motives, etc.)

Notice that a renewed mind leads to a life of testing and approving of God's will. Every Christian is in the process of having their mind changed about what they must have to be happy. We are growing in our imitation of Jesus who said, "my food is to do the will of him who sent me." We increasingly find our satisfaction in doing God's will, not doing our will. We increasingly reject the viewpoint of this age that believes that happiness is to be found in this world and we increasingly look for our happiness in conformity to the will of God as made known to us through Christ in his word. The word of God does not appear to us as an external book of laws that it is our duty to obey. The will of God is not a burden to us, but increasingly it is a delight to us.

Please note the progressive nature of this transformation. Paul does not envision perfect people, but progressing people. The effect of the gospel on our lives is that we grow in our delight in God's will. It begins at conversion and continues through your entire life. When I look back at my life prior to becoming a Christian and compare it to my life following my conversion it is as plain as day what it means to be transformed. Prior to my conversion I loved getting drunk and carousing. I loved getting the best grades and getting academic awards. I loved pursuing women. I had no desire to think about God, go to church to worship God, pray or read the Bible. After my conversion I hated getting drunk. I had no desire to party anymore. I loved going to church and reading the Scriptures and praying. I enjoyed spending my time with other Christians worshipping Christ. I enjoyed sharing the gospel with others and leading Bible studies. My mind, what I thought and what I loved, was transformed. That process that began at conversion continues to this day. As my mind is

transformed, I learn to enjoy and approve of God's will in greater and greater ways, which leads to my using my body in different ways.

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- *Live all of life in God's presence*
- *Delight in the will of God*
- *And who...*

III. Think of themselves correctly (v. 3)

Paul next describes one of the chief transformations that takes place in the thinking of God's people. He describes how we are to think of ourselves in relation to other people. I cannot overemphasize how important what Paul says here is for us. The greatest barrier standing between us becoming what God wants us to be as his church is how we think about ourselves and about others in this church. Our proper relating to one another is affected by how we view each other. The only people who can love others correctly are those who think of themselves and others correctly.

The first thing to note is that the most destructive thing in human relationships is thinking too highly of ourselves. I doubt that many of us would say that we think too highly of ourselves. We all know others who think too highly of themselves, but most of us would not include ourselves in that category. Here is how you know if you are thinking too highly of yourself: how do you respond when people don't treat you the way you want to be treated? If you get angry or sad, if you withdraw from them or attack them, you are thinking too highly of yourself. The single greatest inhibitor in our church or in any church to people loving one another is our demanding to be loved. All of us naturally are unwilling to love others unless we know they are going to reciprocate. The main reason people leave churches is because they don't feel loved by other members in the church. All of us, who feel that we are not being treated as we deserve are thinking too highly of ourselves. It is the nature of human beings to seek out the society of others based upon how they treat us. Paul says here that we are to base our relationships with one another upon a different premise. We are to view ourselves with sober judgment. What does that mean?

Look at the last clause of v. 3. We are to think of ourselves in accordance with the measure of faith God has given us. There are at least three things this clause means for us that will transform how we relate to one another if we can get our minds and hearts around it. First, you are a person who is destined for heaven and not destined for hell, entirely as an act of God's free grace. God didn't choose you because you are such a valuable and attractive person. God chose you because he decided to choose you and contrary to everything you deserve. He gave you faith. He didn't choose you because of your faith. The doctrine of predestination and of God's free and sovereign grace in saving whomever he will is the most humbling doctrine in the Bible. If you are a Christian, you have never been treated the way you deserve and you will never be treated the way you deserve. You deserve eternal hell. God, in his infinite mercy, killed his own Son instead of killing you, called you out of your sin, gave you faith in Christ and destined you for an eternal life of joy with him. There is no place for pride in the Christian. There can only be humble gratitude and amazement that God saved me.

The second thing God's giving each of us faith ought to do to our thinking is to realize that every other Christian is in the same boat that I am in. You are a sinner saved by grace, not by anything you ever did, just like me. I am no higher than you and you are no higher than I before God. The cross of Christ and the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit makes both of us equal before God. Finally, notice that God has not given faith to his people in equal measure. Therefore, the differences that do exist between us as Christians exist by the will and plan of God. The natural, human response to this, especially to our democratic sensibilities is, "That's not fair." That reaction, while normal, reveals a heart that does not understand grace. God owes you nothing but hell. You've done nothing to contribute to your salvation. God is infinitely wise and if you are a member of God's church, no matter how much or how little faith you have, you are being treated infinitely better than you deserve. God has a plan and he hasn't consulted you or anyone else as to how he is going to

execute his plan. It is perfect and includes giving to the various members of his church differing measures of faith.

I want you to think about what faith is. It is a complete reliance upon God for everything. It is believing that God will do what he promises and that what he promises is better than everything else in the world. What the end of v. 3 tells us is that all of us are on a continuum of faith. We are not all at the same maturity level. All of us want to trust Christ more but God, for his own reasons, has made us to differ from one another in the measure of faith he has granted to each of us. This doesn't mean that any of us can be complacent about where we are at and simply say, God made me this way and so I don't need to grow. That's not the point. We all are to be progressing in our faith. However, we are not all going to be progressing at the same rate and God is the one who is in charge of how each of us progress.

There are people in here who have overcome certain sins while others, who have pled with God as long or even longer have not overcome the same sins. Some of us know that we have certain freedoms in Christ, while others are not yet convinced. Some of us have been healed and others continue to suffer physical pain. Some of us are able to live joyfully while others struggle to get out of bed. Do you see how understanding that God has given to each of us a measure of faith undercuts the ground of all judgment of one another? It eliminates the ground of all jealousy and envy. We are all the recipients of enormous mercy and all of us are seeking to not be conformed to the pattern of this age but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. However, we are not all at the same place and this is by God's design. God wants the church to be made up of people who are different from one another. Therefore, our differences do not provide any ground for judgment or comparison. We can accept one another and love one another.

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- *And who...*

IV. Live as the body of Christ (vv. 4-8)

Paul now uses a familiar analogy to show how we are to function together as God's people who are being transformed in the renewing of our minds. Just as we have one body that is made up of different members with different functions so we who belong to Jesus Christ are one body. We differ from one another in the functions we perform in this one body. It is our different functions that make us one body. If we all had the same function, then we would not be a body, but a monstrosity. That's the point Paul makes in 1 Cor. 14. If everyone is an ear, then where is the body? That's what Paul means at the end of v. 5. All the different functioning members belong together because we belong to the one body. You can only have a body when arms, legs, eyes, ears, hands, etc. are all together in one body. Our diversity enables us to be the body.

I don't have the time to discuss in detail each of the gifts that Paul lists here. But I want to make several observations about them. First, Paul is talking to a local church. Every local church is the body of Christ. We are not part of the body of Christ. We and every other church that is in Christ is the body of Christ and each member of each local church is a necessary organ in that body. Second, each member fulfills a different and necessary function in that body. When members of local churches refuse to fulfill their function in the body, the body is disabled. Every single Christian that considers River Hills their church has a function here. Every single Christian must be connected to Christ's church and be fulfilling that function that has been assigned to them. The only way you can be connected to Christ's body is in and through a local church. Third, the function, the gift you are to exercise in this church has been given to you by God, freely, not due to who or what you are or have done.

Fourth, Paul does not view these gifts as some latent ability that you have that you can use when the time comes. Rather, the gift is the work. The unmerited favor of God is expressed by us when we are functioning or working. When we are performing our function is what the gift is, not the latent ability. We don't sit around and wonder what our gift is or take some test to identify what "ability" God has given us. Rather we act to meet needs, to show forth the mercy of God towards others. We don't say, that's not my gift. We see need and we act to meet the need. We seek to serve others in the ways we are motivated and able to do it. We serve by faith, trusting Christ to increase others joy in God through what we do.

Fifth, our functioning as God wants, gives God's grace to others. What we are doing, as we serve one another by our gifts is help one another know the love of God better. We are helping one another to be taken up with Christ more. We are aiming at increasing one another's joy in God. Our goal is not merely meeting physical, emotional or psychological need. Rather we are aiming at building the faith of others. Enabling others to rely upon God more and so offer their bodies to him in greater ways. Our goal is not to make people feel better about themselves but to feel better about God and his grace towards them.

Finally, let me point out that the gifts, the functions Paul lists in vv. 6-8 fall into the general categories of words and works, speech and action. Prophecy, teaching and encouraging are all verbal functions. There are many of us whom God has called to use our mouths to give his grace to others. Then there are others of us whom God has called to give his grace through our loving action. Serving, contributing to the needs of others, leading and showing mercy are all actions. Both words and actions are necessary. Every church is full of people whom God has gifted to help others by speaking and by acting. Are you fulfilling the function that God has called you to fulfill in this church? Are you, as a result of having a renewed mind, offering your body to God by exercising the gifts God gave you in order to give God's grace to others? Paul views this as the normal and natural effect of the gospel in our lives. This is the physical evidence of the spiritual change that God has worked in the lives of all his people.

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- *Live all of life in God's presence*
- *Delight in the will of God*
- *Think correctly about themselves*
- *Fulfill the role each has been assigned*

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