

Romans 12:1-7

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

## GOD'S WILL

Have you seen those signs beside the road, those little messages from God? They say something cryptic like, "We need to talk. God." Indeed we do. But, what would God say to us? What might God want us to do?

That's the big question that many people have. What is God's will for my life? What does God want me to do? Wouldn't it be nice if we could just see the answer on a billboard?

But, most of the time the answer to that question seems to elude us. We talk a lot about God, but when it comes to God's will for our lives ... well, we don't have a clue.

Actually, we do have a clue. It's just that we don't like the answer.

There's an old story about an agnostic who fell off a cliff, but before he dove to his death he managed to catch a small branch. He decided to call on God for the first time in his life. He cried, "God, if you're real, help me. Is there anybody up there?"

And miraculously after a long silence a voice came from above. The Lord said, "Let go of the bush and I will save you." The man looked up and then he looked down at the ground far below. And after another long silence he cried, "Is there anyone else up there?"

We are sometimes like that man hanging by a thread. We say that we want to know God's will. But, when we hear it, we're not so sure. We know what God wants us to do. We're just not so sure that we want to do it.

## REDESIGNING THE GOSPEL

Following God's will as revealed in Jesus Christ is a great challenge. Some people blithely say, "Let go and let God" as if faith was as simple as falling off a log.

But, if you know anything about the gospels and what Jesus challenged his disciples to do, you know that it's just not that easy. Jesus told his disciples to deny themselves. Jesus told his disciples to take up a cross and follow him. And later Paul told the church at Rome, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

That's God will for your life. God wants you to give Him everything. Don't hold anything back.

And like the agnostic hanging from the cliff we shout, "Is there anyone else up there?" Some have even redesigned the Christian faith to be more compatible with the need of a consumer society. The challenge of God's will for our lives is replaced with banal search for a church that "meets my needs."

Really? Is that the gospel, God meeting my needs? I don't think so.

If that's what you want you have come to the wrong place. The good news is not that God gives us what we want when we want it. The good news is that God saves us for a greater purpose, His purpose.

## LEARNING TO FOLLOW

And that purpose is revealed once we let go and follow God wherever He leads. Once we can say with Jesus in the time of testing "not my will but your will be done" then and only then can begin the journey with God.

A minister told of a little girl who broke free of her mother's hand and began to run toward a busy street. The pregnant mother had an infant in her arms and could not run after her little girl. So, the minister dropped his books and ran to stop the child from running into traffic.

He said that as he chased the little girl she looked back at him laughing. She was determined to make it to the street before he got there, totally unaware of the danger that lay ahead. Fortunately he was able to catch her before she got to the street.

But, that's how many of us live our lives. We run blindly toward destruction. We do not know that the one who pursues us does so to save us from ourselves.

C.S. Lewis once said "all genuine conversions are blessed defeats." In order to know God's will and live God's will, we have to surrender to God's will.

This means that we must change how we approach God. Instead of telling God what we want and asking him to bless it, we must surrender to God and ask God to do what He wants to do with us. Until we reach this point we will not make any progress in the journey of faith.

So, Paul tells us, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Surrender your will to God’s will.” Yes, the future is uncertain. But, the future is God’s future, and that’s all we need to know.

### THE MERCIES OF GOD

Did you notice why we can dare to surrender everything to God? Paul said, “By the mercies of God present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” The “mercies of God” form the basis for Paul’s appeal.

In other words, we can surrender everything to God and trust God in good times and in bad because we know something about the character of God. God is love. God is gracious. God is merciful. In the end God’s gracious plan will prevail.

If we believe that, if we believe that God is revealed in the compassion and justice of Jesus, then that knowledge changes us. We realize that evil will not prevail. Indeed, when the evil one does his worst, God uses that evil for a greater good. The mercies of God prevail. In the end God will come to judge the living and the dead.

Do you believe that? Do you believe in the love and mercy of almighty God? Then surrender your will to his will. Seek to please God more than men and women.

Suppose a little boy loves and adores his father. He wants to spend time with his father, and his father is happy to oblige.

The father shows the little boy how to do many things: throw a ball, swing a golf club, mow the lawn, and so forth. And after each activity the little boy asks,

“How did I do? How did I do?”

And the father wraps his arms around the little boy and says,

“You did great. I am so proud of you.” The little boy lives for moments like this, and all his life he does things to please his father.

That’s what it means to obey God’s will. God has wrapped His arms around us in love and mercy.

And that heavenly hug provides the foundation for our life. We want to do God’s will. We want to give our life to Him. His great love for us compels us to make that sacrifice.

## MIND RENEWAL, WORLD CHANGE

And mind you it is a sacrifice to do God's will. Why? The ways of God are different from the ways of the world.

In order to "discern God's will" we need to surrender not only our hearts but also our minds to God. We need to change how we think about things.

The Scripture tells us that instead of conforming to the world we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The Christian faith is a faith for nonconformists!

Martin Luther King in a sermon on this passage once said that most people "are thermometers that record or register the temperature of majority opinion, not thermostats that transform and regulate the temperature of society."

In this passage Paul tells us that we are to be thermostats and not merely thermometers. We are not called to merely reflect the views of society. We are not called to conform to the world. We are called to transform the world through the renewal of our minds.

The Christian gospel, the Christian way of thinking is so powerful that it has the ability to change the world, to save the world.

And that is God's goal. (John 3:16)

But, quite often we who claim to be Christian are not transformed by the call of Christ. Instead we are conformed to the ways of the world.

Social scientists tell us that Christians divorce at about the same rate as the general population, watch the same films and television shows, and read the same books.

We give about the same percentage of our incomes to charity as others ... and so forth. In the past Christians have defended slavery, wars and economic exploitation.

In other words in the past and in the present many of us in the church have a hard time being who we are called to be. Instead of being transformed by the grace of God we have been conformed to the ways of the world. We swallow the cultural propaganda hook, line and sinker.

We believe that politics is the most important news. We glorify immoral behavior. We act like money makes the world go round. We have become thermometers instead of the thermostats that God wants us to be.

## DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Christians are not called to merely register and promote public opinion. Christians are called to be different. Christians are called to die to the old way of life and live in a new way.

Indeed, that is one interpretation of baptism. The death and resurrection of Jesus are mirrored in the death of our old way of life and the birth of our new way of life. (Romans 6:4-6)

We are called to proclaim the kingdom of God in which enemies are loved and we do good to those who persecute us. We proclaim the kingdom of God in which the highest good is not revenge but forgiveness.

We proclaim the kingdom of God where love is not defined by pleasure but by sacrifice. We proclaim the kingdom of God in which we are not judged by the world, but the world is judged by the standards of God's grace and mercy.

I know. It sounds incredible. It sounds unrealistic. But, it is the message of God's kingdom as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Even a cross could not stop the power of God's grace and salvation. Those who can kill the body have no power over us, not when we know the One who can save our very soul.

Jesus once told his followers that they were the salt of the earth. They were seemingly small and insignificant. But, as we all know, just a little bit of salt can completely change the flavor of a dish. And in the same way the salt of transformed Christians can (in God's hands) change the world.

## STARS AND SERVANTS

Writer Philip Yancey once made a fascinating observation about finding fulfillment. In his career as a journalist he has interviewed a wide variety of people. And he divides these people into two groups: stars and servants.

For the stars, famous athletes, authors and TV personalities Yancey has sympathy. He wrote that these "idols are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met." According to the standards of this age these people have it made. They are famous. They have their pictures in magazines. They live in big, expensive homes. Some of us wish that we were just like them.

But, generally speaking we don't see the other side of fame. We don't see their troubled marriages, their troubled psyches, and the incurable self-doubts.

Yancey contrasts the life-styles of these stars with a group he calls servants. Servants included folks such as relief workers in impoverished lands and language experts

scattered throughout the jungles of South America translating the Bible into obscure languages.

Yancey wrote, “I was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to uphold them as inspiring examples. I was not prepared to envy them.” But, envy them he did. As he reflected on the two groups, stars and servants he declared,

“The servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours and no applause, ‘wasting their talents among the poor and the uneducated. But, somehow in the process of losing their lives, they have found them.”

God’s ways are not our ways. And in order to get our minds wrapped around God’s ways we have to change radically. The old has to pass away. The new has to come.

Instead of being conformed to the ways of this world we must be transformed by the Word of God and the power of the Spirit. We must have the mind of Christ. We must be changed from the inside out.

#### CHANGED ON THE OUTSIDE

Year’s ago a barber supply company held a convention in a large city. And to show the world how good their products were they organized a publicity stunt.

They went to the worst section of town and brought back the dirtiest and most helpless drunk they could find. They presented him on stage. Everyone saw how dirty and unkempt his hair and beard were.

Then they took him out and cleaned him up. They shaved him. They shampooed and styled his hair. They sprayed him with cologne. They bought him a new suit, a new shirt and shoes. He looked great.

They brought him back on stage to show him off, saying to the entire world, “This is what our barber supplies can do for you!”

You know the rest of the story. A few days later they found the man again, lying in the gutter, filthy and drunk.

It sort of reminds me of that homeless man who had the golden voice. When a local TV station recorded his voice and told his story, the video went viral. All sorts of people tried to help him.

They cleaned him up and got him a job doing commercials with Kraft foods. He had interviews with TV stations and talk shows all over the country. There was even talk that he would become the voice of the Cleveland Cavaliers.

But then reality struck. He got into a fight with his daughter. He admitted to “Dr. Phil” that he was still drinking and agreed to check himself into rehab. And then he checked himself out of rehab.

The journalists that made him into a celebrity released his extensive rap sheet and the fact that he long ago abandoned his nine children. Apparently the man with a golden voice did not have a golden history.

And then he was abandoned almost as quickly as he was embraced. Changing the outward circumstances of this man did not change what was on the inside.

### CHANGED ON THE INSIDE

Paul didn’t want to dress people up on the outside and pretend that they were different. Paul wanted to change people on the inside because in the final analysis it’s that internal change that really makes the difference.

Jesus told his disciples, “Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.” (Luke 12:23) “So do not worry saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’

For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But, seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

Seek first his kingdom. Have a sense of priority. Know what is really important. Know who is really important. This is what keeps us from being conformed to the pattern of the world. This is what transforms us by the renewing of our mind.

Augustine once said, “We imitate whom we adore.” And as we adore Christ we will imitate him. Our mind and our lives will be renewed. We will learn the joy of giving our lives to him.

### THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF WORSHIP

What is the most important part of worship? Is it the sermon? Is it the music? Is it the declaration of pardon?

All of those are important. But, I would like to suggest something you might not expect. Perhaps the offering is the most important part of our worship service!

I know. Some of you see the offering as a needless intrusion into worship instead of being the point of worship. Too often we see it as a time to fumble for our wallets or take the kids to the bathroom.

But, the offering is actually the point of worship. It is the time when we offer not only our money but also and more importantly our lives to God.

We're going to need a bigger table to hold that collection! We lay not only our gifts but also ourselves upon that communion table.

It becomes an altar. We surrender all to God and ask Him to use us for His purpose.

God help us surrender all to him this very day. Let us be transformed on the inside by the power of God's Word and Spirit.

Amen.