

“A New Way of Thinking“

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Romans 12:1-8

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.

A PLEA FOR SALVATION

These past few weeks we've seen that Paul's letter to the Romans is a passionate plea for the salvation of those who are lost.

He spoke, first of all, about the fact that the law is not enough to save us. Even the best of laws ... even God's laws cannot save us.

In fact it seems like that old saying ... rules are made to be broken ... applies to everyone.

Jew and Gentile alike are guilty of breaking the law.
We fall short of the people God has called us to be.

Paul does not leave himself out on this point.

He said that the things he should be doing are the very things he neglects.

And the things he shouldn't be doing ... well those are the very things he finds himself doing.

He can't help himself

In essence Paul asked,

"What's this world coming to?"

Who will save us from our own bad behavior?

Some of us just throw up our hands in despair.

My grandparents used to talk about the world going to hell in a hand basket.

Not sure what that means exactly, but we all get the drift. People have been predicting destruction for a long time.

But not Paul.

Despite evidence to the contrary, he said that the world is not destined for destruction.

God in Christ is in the business of saving the world.

In the end, the power of God's grace will prove greater than the power of evil.

That's his final answer.

Paul believes this.

FAITH DOES NOT COME EASY

But, this faith does not come easy.

In Paul's day and time (as it is in our day and time) things could look pretty grim.

In his letter to the Romans Paul struggles because he and everyone else he knows have fallen far short of the glory of God.

Sin is pervasive.

And though Paul believes salvation comes by grace alone and that God's grace will eventually triumph, it is no cheap, easy grace.

It is a grace born of personal struggle.
The cross looms large in the story of salvation ... not only the cross of Christ, but the cross we are called to bear.

These last few weeks we have seen that this struggle was particularly intense when it came to the fate of the Israelites, God's chosen people.

Did God un-choose them?
Did God decide to replace the Jews?

After allowing us to listen in on his mental anguish about this, Paul decided that this couldn't be true.

God does not go back on God's promises.
Somehow, some way, salvation would come to the Jews as well.

Paul realized that he would have to leave it at that.
He would have to trust the deep waters of God's grace instead of the limits of his shallow thinking.

He wrote, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Romans 11:33)

I suggested last week that in the ups and downs of our life, we too would be well advised to head for the deep waters of God's grace.

Instead of trying to figure things out on our own, we trust in the fact that well... God's God ... and we're not.

We might not understand why things happen as they do.

But, we can always trust in the character of God.

The Bible tells us that God is love.

In life and in death we belong to this God.

WORSHIP

And if we want to connect with that God we need to become a part of those places in the world where we see love in action.

The Christian answer to the question,

“What’s this world coming to?”

... is to worship the God who created the world and all that is in it.

Paul concludes chapter 11 with such a word of worship,

“For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen.”

But, don’t think the worship service is over once the last “amen” is said.

Far from it.

When you walk out the door this morning, worship is just beginning.

Paul wrote in our lesson for today,

“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.” (12:1)

Our bodies are a living sacrifice.

What we do and how we live reflects our understanding of God.

If we stake our life on the amazing grace of God, we will become gracious people.

If we believe that God is love, then love will become a high priority in our life.

This is the definition of holiness.
We reflect, however imperfectly, the grace of God.
And this is the kind of worship that our Lord desires of us.

JUSTICE INSTEAD OF INCENSE

In the Old Testament we read about a time when God's people were into fancy worship services.

They burned incense.
They had an elaborate liturgy.

They sacrificed animals to atone for their sin.
They venerated the law of God and studied it in great detail.

But, one thing they didn't always do.
They didn't always serve others in the name of the Lord.

In fact, sometimes they did quite the opposite.
They took advantage of the poor, and oppressed the foreigners in their land.

God through the prophets said that their elaborate worship wouldn't cut it.
God hadn't asked the people for all these rituals, incense, and sacrifices.
In fact all these things were an abomination to the Lord. Their incense and sacrifices smelled bad!

So how could they worship God in a way that was pleasing?

According to the prophet, they needed to:
"learn to do good; seek justice,
rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan,
plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:12-17)

We too are called to defend the defenseless.
Why? Because we know the depths of God's grace,
and this is how we worship God.

When our lives become a living sacrifice, this is our spiritual worship.

TRUE SPIRITUALITY

There's a lot of talk about "spirituality" these days.
Even people who have no faith talk about being "spiritual but not religious".

But, true spirituality is not a feeling.
True spirituality is not elaborate rituals.
True spirituality is not getting away from it all in nature.

Spiritual worship is not defined by style ... traditional or modern or something in between.

Spiritual worship is an action.
Spiritual worship is a way of life based upon our experience of God's grace.

To paraphrase the words of the apostle Paul,
Once we were no people.
Once we lived in exile far from the promises of God.
But, now we have been brought near to heart of God through the cross of Christ.

We see a human picture of God's love and grace on the cross.
Evil and even death did not defeat God's love and grace.

So how do we respond to that?
How does the message of the cross affect us today?

We respond by dedicating our lives to forgiveness.
We respond by figuring out ways to bring people together instead of tearing them apart.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

What Paul told the Romans is true today.
The ways of the world truly are at odds with God's ways.

Watch the news for fifteen minutes and count all the ways that the world is seeking to tear us apart. Look at how justice and mercy take a back seat to politics and polemics.

Those in power seek to control us by appealing to our worst instincts. And we'll fall for it every time ... unless we start thinking about things differently.

The key to spiritual worship, worship that involves laying down our lives as well as our lips, is just this ... a new way of thinking.

In verse 2 Paul writes,
"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ..."

Not too long ago people believed that slavery was okay. It was the way of the world.

Many of the founding fathers of our country also had slaves and believed in slavery.

That was their mindset.

They were conformed to the world on this.

What they needed was a whole new way of thinking.

The Christian faith, for those who had ears to hear, gave them that new way of thinking.

AMAZING GRACE

Last week we sang the hymn, Amazing Grace.

Many of you know the story behind that hymn.

It was written by John Newton, a man who was so profane it was said that he could even teach the sailors of that day some new words!

He later became captain of a slave ship, and like almost everyone in that period of history, saw nothing wrong with what he did.

But, over time that changed.

The grace of God eventually led him to become an abolitionist.

And on New Year's Day, 1773 he wrote the words to Amazing Grace to illustrate a sermon.

Eventually this hymn would become very popular in America in the 19th century during the Second Great Awakening.

And the hymn was an especially popular folk hymn in the African American community that was struggling to be free from the bonds of slavery.

By the grace of God, a profane man who saw nothing wrong with slavery was changed from a wretch to someone who was saved.

And he wrote the words to a song that has brought comfort and hope to millions ... including those who found themselves in slavery.

That's what happens when the gospel gives a person a new way of thinking.

We are no longer conformed to the ways of the world. We are no longer trapped by our own prejudices and failures.

The grace of God allows us to crucify the old way of life.

We are no longer blind to what we are doing and saying.

PERFECT

God enables us to do what is (as Paul puts it) "good, and acceptable, and perfect." (12:2b)

That word translated "perfect" is a bit misleading. It doesn't mean that we can magically be transformed into people who do no wrong.

The Greek word refers to an understanding of God's will that draws us into the future.

Have you ever met someone who is absolutely totally devoted to a certain way of thinking and doing things?

Maybe they have a particular religious view or a particular political view.

Or maybe their life is consumed by a desire to be the best athlete or the best musician ... or whatever.

Their daily actions are guided daily by this desire, by this pursuit of perfection.

Golfers practice their chipping and putting each day for hours on end.
Politicians raise money and work tirelessly for their candidate.
Musicians practice their instrument every day with the goal of making beautiful music.

And so forth.

They are seeking a future goal through a present action. This is what this word translated "perfect" mean.

When amazing grace opens our eyes, we see new horizons.
And that changes the way we choose to live our life.

It changes our priorities.
And it draws us forward toward the will of God ... toward God's perfect future.

When God's amazing grace changes the life of just one person, it's like we've thrown a rock into a pond. The ripples have an effect that stretches far beyond the original action.

The effects of God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ continues to create ripples in the fabric of our world.

Grace is the great eye opener.
More than anything else it has the power to change who we are today, tomorrow and forever.

HUMILITY

What is it about grace that's so amazing and powerful?
In word: humility.

Humility is not a word that we often associate with power.

In fact some people wrongly associate humility with humiliation. It connotes someone who beats themselves down.

But, that's the wrong idea.

Humility comes from the Latin word, *humus* which means earth.

So you might say that humility is being "down to earth," ... and *not* having our head in the clouds.

It doesn't mean groveling before others.

It means standing in solidarity with the human family in good times and bad.

The best example of this human humility is the life of Christ.

Humility was one of the defining characteristics of Jesus. It was what made him different. And it was what made him powerful.

The humility of Christ changed the world.

And the humility of Christ can change us.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians that we should have the "same mind" that was in Christ Jesus.

The mindset of Jesus was one of humility. He emptied himself of power and glory.

He humbled himself ... even to the point of death on the cross. (Philippians 2:3-8)

TEAM PLAYERS

So if Christ was humble, maybe we should be too.

In a world that values glory and winning, we are called to value sacrifice and service.

Paul wrote in verse 3 of our lesson for today,

"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.”

The world might think that encouraging humility is crazy.

But, not so.

When humility becomes a part of our mindset, when humility guides what we do and where we go in life, we are in tune with the very will of God.

We “think with sober judgment” the Scripture says.

Or another way to translate that word is to say, “We are in our right mind.” According to Scripture the desire to gain advantage and status is the truly crazy behavior.

In contrast, the grace of God teaches us to be a team player.

We recognize the face of God in the gifts of those around us. And we celebrate that grace.

We’re not all the same.

Paul lists a variety of spiritual gifts in this passage.

The list shorter but it reminds us of the list he gives in his first letter to the Corinthians. (1 Corinthians 12)

But, the point in both of these passages is the same.

We are ... all of us ... the body of Christ.

And we’re all different.

We don’t have the same gifts.

But, we do all have the same mindset.

We have the same goal.

We are going in the same direction.

Our life together is marked by a humility born of grace.

And so we rejoice in the variety of gifts that God has given us.

SPONTANEOUS SERVICE

As most of you know, this past week a local barbecue restaurant offered free food to the community as a way of providing support to the police department.

One of our members saw an opportunity to help with that effort by opening up fellowship hall to the community and serving deserts to complement the meal.

We asked for donations and did we ever get them.
You could literally smell the sugar in the room!

Our members set up and decorated fellowship hall.
They showed up to direct people and help them find what they needed.
They made signs.

When the air conditioning broke at the most inopportune time, they made sure it got fixed.

They sat down and talked with the folks that came to eat.
It was a spontaneous expression of support for people who had been terribly hurt.

And I was grateful for those who were able to come out and help.

It was a team effort.
And I also think this is an example of what Paul is talking about in our passage for today.

We join together to serve because this is who we are called to be.

We don't serve because we want to be recognized.
We serve because we have experienced the grace of God.

And we want to pass that grace on to others.

We used to sing about it at church camp.

Do some of you remember Pass It On?

Those of us who are baby boomers and grew up in the church know it by heart.

Why don't we close the morning by singing that first line?

"It only takes a spark to get a fire going.

And soon all those around will warm up to it's glowing.

That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it.

You spread his love to everyone.
You want to pass it on."

Amen.