

Pleasing God – Serving in Ministry

Romans 12:1-13

August 1, 2010

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One Sunday morning, the pastor of an old country church noticed little Johnny standing in the foyer, looking at a large plaque of names that hung there. After the young man had stood there for some time, the pastor walked up beside him and said quietly, "Good morning, son." "Good morning, Pastor," replied the youngster, still not taking his eyes off the plaque. "Can you please tell me why all these names are listed here?" The pastor replied, "Well, son, this plaque honors all the people who have died in ministry to this Church". Quietly they stood there together, still staring at the large plaque. Finally, Johnny's voice broke the silence when he asked quietly, "Pastor, can you tell me which ministries they died in?"

While the work of ministry is often hard, I am confident that it is rarely responsible for anyone's death. But I am interested this morning in having us briefly examine our own perspectives on ministry. So indulge me, if you will, with a little mental exercise. No need to worry, this is not a test or psychological evaluation. And the results will not be turned in to your Elder. I'd simply like you to clear your mind and reflect on your view of ministry. Are you ready? Go ahead and take a few moments to consider your thoughts and attitudes around the idea of ministry.

So what comes to mind first when you think of ministry? Do your initial thoughts lean toward it being dull, difficult, and discouraging? Or perhaps you think of it as fulfilling and satisfying? Are your initial reflections on it as being hard, tiring, and thankless? Or do you find that your mind runs to the blessings and joys of being poured out for the sake of others? To be fair, at times ministry is all these things. But our initial thoughts can reveal the underlying bent of our hearts and whether we are poised to view ministry as a duty or a delight.

This morning we continue looking at different aspects of pleasing God. I've had the privilege of preaching two messages around our serving within the Church. The first of these was on diaconal leadership and the second on pleasing God in our serving within the community of believers. This morning I would like to focus-in even more and look at serving in ministry. As we work through the passage this morning, we are going to take a deeper dive into what it means to please God as we serve Christ and the body in the functional ministries of the Chapel.

Much of what we do to serve one another within the Chapel is structured and implemented in terms of ministries. While some of these ministries are derived directly or indirectly out of scripture, the majority of our ministries are established out of what we understand to be biblically wise and good to accomplish the mission and vision of the Chapel.

But we must be careful not to define ministry primarily in terms of functional organizations and processes. The biblical aim of ministry is always people. The function and structure of ministries must always serve God's purposes toward people and not the other way around. It is all too easy in the day to day doing of ministry to get this backwards and forget that it is Christ and His body we serve.

This morning's passage is the first part of Romans 12. At this point in Paul's letter he transitions from the glorious truths of what we have and who we are in Christ to the implications of those truths. In other words, because we are no longer condemned; because we have been declared righteous in Christ; because we have peace with God, because we are alive with Christ; because we have a salvation that is not our own but was purchased on the cross and paid to our account; because we are now heirs with Christ; and because our hope of glory is secure in Christ, we who have been given grace upon grace are to become who we are in Christ and see it reflected in how we live with others.

What is true about who we are should change how we choose to live with others. The truths or doctrines from the earlier part of Paul's letter to the Romans were to affect not just who they were, but must necessarily flow into the way they lived. We are all familiar with the passage in James that reminds us that faith without works is dead. If we say we have saving faith without the transformation and change that comes with that faith, then it is useless and dead.

Here in Romans 12, the text instructs us that these changes are to be evident in our relationships to both believers and the lost. Thus the first part of Romans 12 deals with pleasing God in our relationship within the body of Christ and the latter part deals with pleasing God in our relationships with unbelievers. Pastor Russ preached on pleasing God in relationship to unbelievers from verses 14 through the end of the Chapter just over a month ago. This morning, we will go back and look at the earlier section as it relates to pleasing God in relationship to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Please keep in mind that while this passage speaks to the wider scope of our relationships to unbelievers, for the purposes of this message I would like to focus our application primarily on how we serve in ministry. Yet even as we work through the text with a narrower focus, I encourage you to look for the broader application which I pray will be evident to you.

So please turn with me to Chapter 12 of Romans where we will start with verse 1. Follow along as I read God's word to us this morning.

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, 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 renewal of your mind, that by testing 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 himself more highly than he 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 the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

[prayer]

The first two verses in Chapter 12 are huge pivotal verses in the overall context of Paul's letter. Here is the loving appeal of a pastor to his flock to consider the gospel truths he has so marvelously outlined and to now live out the reality of that transforming power. This is the believer's response to God's grace received in Christ; a response that is made possible in Christ and is to be seen in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Let's go back and review verses 1 and 2 of the text. *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Verse 1 contains an appeal to make a response of **commitment**. Paul uses the words "living sacrifice" to convey the Old Testament idea of the giving of a life. **In the old covenant economy, the commitment of the sacrifice was complete.** The sacrifice gave its life to cover the sins of the people. Under the new covenant, in view of God's mercies we are to present our lives as righteous, holy sacrifices to God.

We do this not based upon what *we* have done, but what *Christ* has done for us. This is indeed what Paul refers to literally as "our reasonable act of worship or service". And it is reasonable not only in terms of being a right response; but it is a reasonable expectation because God has enabled us in Christ to be acceptable in His sight.

But not only is our response one of commitment, we see in verse 2 a parallel response of transformation. Just as the commitment is total, so the transformation in mind here is neither partial nor unfinished. While at times we are tempted to doubt it, the transforming power and work of the gospel is in fact complete. We are now new creatures in Christ. Yes, there is a growing and maturing process in the life of the believer. But who we are has been fundamentally and forever changed.

This verse echoes the earlier thought of Paul in Chapter 8 and verse 29 of Romans, where we see that **we are being conformed by God to the image of His Son**. So the Christian life is one of being renewed in mind so that we may know the will of God and do what is good and perfect in his sight. Again, this is not a transformation out of our own will and ability, but one brought about by the power of the gospel through the righteousness of Christ.

In light of serving in ministry, **we must then view our participation as a commitment or sacrifice**. Yet as believers, **we find ourselves in the wonderful position that God has provided both the motivation and the means for sacrificial service in ministry**. As we serve, we demonstrate the transformation that has taken place within us, conforming us to who we are in Christ. Thus we can live and serve in a way that is acceptable and pleasing to God and is aligned with His good and perfect will.

Let's continue on. Having seen that God enables the righteousness of His people through committed and transformed lives, our text moves on to remind us of the gifts of grace that are ours in Christ. These gifts are not to be used in service to self, but rather they are to be poured out for the good of others. The emphasis of these verses is to instruct and encourage believers in the biblical use of those gifts within the body.

The first of these encouragements is in their proper **assessment**. Please follow along again as I read verse 3 of the text. *"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."*

While the thought of sober judgment here is to have a self-assessment or self-view that is neither too high nor too low, the clear warning cautions us against our human tendency to inflate our self worth and to esteem ourselves higher than we ought; this is particularly true where we view ourselves in respect to our relationships with others. Our worlds have a tendency to revolve around our own wants and desires rather than considering and preferring the needs of others.

Now if we think biblically about it, the righteousness with which we serve is received through Christ. We should not boast or think too highly of ourselves as if we serve out of our own doing. You see esteeming ourselves too highly is not just sinful pride, but it takes credit for what God has done in us through Christ. Therefore if Christ is the source of our righteousness, what is to be the measure or standard with which we should judge ourselves? Is it not also Christ?

It is likely that the literal meaning of the latter part of this verse is that with sound judgment, we are to measure ourselves against the standard that God has supplied, which is intended to point us to Christ who modeled the high standard of God's word. Such a standard for our lives and service in ministry cannot help but lead us to a sober judgment that recognizes we will never measure up to the sacrifices He made on our behalf. Isn't it interesting that where our sinful nature would have us pridefully measure ourselves against the standard of others, scripture humbles us by pointing back to the example of Christ.

Here also we find a danger to ministry and serving in the Church. Pride and selfishness will damage ministries and can bring serious harm to relationships within the church. So when we are tempted to take the credit ourselves, to make self-deprecating comments to gain the praise of other, to boast of our own accomplishments, or to demean the work of others, let us remember the humble example of Christ our Redeemer. Then we shall fall upon our faces and with broken hearts confess that we can do nothing in ministry without the grace and strength that He supplies.

The second encouragement from this text is of the diversity given the body of Christ. Let's look again to God's word in verses 4 and 5 of this passage. *"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."*

The word "for" at the beginning of this passage connects it with the previous verse. The sense here is that not only are we to think properly about ourselves, but we are to think properly and biblically about each other. We have preached through several texts in this series that remind us of the unique character of the body of Christ. We have seen our essential unity, our variety of gifts, and our mutual dependence upon the whole.

This is the mystery and beauty of the church. That God has divinely assigned and distributed various gifts for the good of the Church. This means that we are not to second guess God's distribution of gifts, be jealous over the gifts and roles of others, minimize or repress the gifts of others, or measure others against our own areas of giftedness. What an amazing God who has not only given us all we need in Christ *individually*, so He has equipped and supplied the *Church* with gifts of grace to serve one another.

Within the scope of ministry, we are to use our gifts in cooperation with other ministries and with consideration to the body. We are to engage in ministry with a proper view of the body that moves us to a humble service that is more concerned with others and those we serve than with ourselves. It will drive us to see our greater identity as the body of Christ and serve its good rather than serving our own identity and self. And it will lead us to see our belonging to Christ and one another in a way that supports our growing and maturing together rather than promoting self and personal agendas.

The final encouragement or instruction from the text is the responsibility to use the gifts given the body. Here is what God's word says in verses 6 through 8 of the text. *"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."*

Not only are we to think biblically and right about ourselves and in relation to one another, but we are to have a proper sense of their use within the body. The sense of the encouragement here is that individually, we have been given all we need in Christ. And the body of Christ as a whole has been given a variety of gifts to use in service. These gifts of grace are not to be locked in the dark corner of a spiritual closet. In fact, we can almost hear the urgency in Paul's words when he writes, "let us use them".

For our gifts to be useful they must be exercised in service to others. It is only in their use that there is an expression of the grace and blessing we have in Christ; even as we serve one another. There are no exclusions or exemptions; there are none in the body without gifts. You can't wear your gifts out. In fact, I believe that as you use them, you will develop them just as exercising develops strength and coordination.

So whatever your gifts, find a ministry or ministries in which they can be used to serve. There are very few ministries at the Chapel that couldn't use additional assistance and the use of your gifts in service to the body. God, by His sovereign design, brought each of us here and gave us gifts to be used in service to one another. Ministries are the primary means to organize and connect people and their gifts with needs. And God is pleased when His people engage in the work of ministry through the giving of time and gifts in service to the body of Christ.

I would like to spend the remainder of our time focusing on practical applications for ministry that flow out of these last three verses. We have worked through our

response to God's grace and then seen the importance of a proper view of God's gifts of grace. The final portion of the passage speaks to the results of grace.

The question that arises, and is then answered in the text is this. If God has enabled us in Christ to live sacrificial and transformed lives and has given us gifts of grace to serve one another, what results or evidence will there be in our relationships with other believers? What follows in our text is not an exhaustive list, but one which defines the general character and shape of the grace and power of the Gospel at work in our lives.

Please follow along again as we turn to God's word in verses 9 and 10. *"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."*

The first result of grace in our relationships with other believers is **sincere love**. I do not believe it is coincidental that Paul starts out with this quality. Love is an essential element **that provides a solid foundation for building our relationships with one another**. It is also interesting to note that the word for love here is "agape", which is often used to describe God's divine love for us. The implication is that our love for one another is to be modeled after the example of Christ's love for His people. It is not a superficial, sentimental, "Hi, what do you think of the weather" kind of love. Rather it is a genuine, deep, and faithful kind of love that prefers others at the expense of self.

In terms of ministry let me make several applications that I hope will challenge us and help us to grow into the image of Christ. First, we see from the text that **there is to be a sense of hating evil and clinging to what is good and right when it comes to our relationships with one another**. Even in ministry, it should be our desire to root out the effects of sin, to forgive offenses, and overlook the differences and quirks of others that often bother and irritate us. Moreover, it should be our sincere desire to want the best for others, to see them grow and mature in Christ, and give them the benefit of the doubt when it comes to misunderstandings.

There is also to be **a deep affection both for those we serve with and for those we minister to**. I believe this is to be expressed in both word and deed. Our conversations are to be kind and express genuine love. We are to prefer others. Not just when it is easy, but especially when it costs us something. It is a quality that is willing to wait on others even when we need to get something else done. It is a desire to put the people we serve first, even if it means changing our own plans and agendas. And it is a genuine concern for the welfare and care for those we minister to, even when it means sacrificing our time, strength, and energy.

In our love there is also to be a quality of honor shown to one another. It is funny, and sometimes painful, how scripture gets to the root of the sin that would keep us from pleasing God in ministry. Our sinful nature is drawn to honor self and not others. As if to be sure we make no mistake, the words of the text here set a standard of outdoing one another in honor. This is not a passive, quiet honoring somewhere in the recesses of our heart. It is to be actively worked at, as if we were competing in an "honoring" contest for a prize to the one who honored others the most.

In ministry this is often expressed in our preferring or deferring to one another. There is a sense that we should find great pleasure in serving others and rejoicing when they are honored above ourselves. It is a sense of respect for those we serve and serve along side in ministry. It is an intentional lowering of ourselves so that brothers and sisters in Christ may be well served. It is following the example of Christ, who became a servant for our sake. If our loving Savior, who set aside the rights and riches of glory so that He might sacrifice His life, gave us this example, how can we not make a few minor sacrifices for the sake of those He died for?

Let's continue on. Follow along as I read verse 11. *"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord."*

The second result of grace in our relationships with other believers is diligence. When it comes to our relationships within the body, we are to serve with all that we are. There is to be an energy and vitality to our ministry that reflects our love for one another and for our Lord. We are to be faithful in ministry and support the work even when it becomes difficult and challenging. I believe this verse conveys the idea of pressing on with enthusiasm and encouragement for others in ministry. I believe it is exemplified by a passion for ministry that sees beyond the task at hand and to the Lord who is ultimately being served. We cannot let our heart for ministry grow cold if we are to serve Christ and His body.

The third result of grace in our relationships with other believers is persistence. Look for how this is packed into the brief text of verse 12. *"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."*

The persistence in mind here is in regard to our joy, patience, and regularity of prayer. The results of grace lead us to find joy in ministry even when it requires sacrifice, even when there is little thanks; because it is able to rejoice in anticipation and glorious hope of heaven. It sees that ministry here on earth is actually service in the Kingdom of God. It understands that here is a reality to what we do here in ministry that extends beyond this temporary existence to the spiritual realities we have in Christ.

Grace also leads us to be persistently patient in the hard work and sacrifice of ministry. It enables us to be long suffering with others and provide encouragement and loving correction when needed. It is willing to wait for others at the expense of self.

And the results of grace lead us to be persistent in prayer. The Greek word for "constant" here conveys the sense of a steadfast commitment and continued attention

to an activity or task. Too often we neglect to pray for our ministries and the people who are served by them. The text may convict many of us over our lack of faithfulness in prayer over ministry. Prayer is an essential expression of our faith and dependence upon God to succeed in ministry and align our hearts with His will. Let us be reminded that ministry must begin and be supported through the faithful prayers of God's people.

Let's quickly move on to the last verse. Follow along as I read verse 13. *"Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."*

The last result of grace in our relationships with other believers is generosity. If love is the foundation for building relationships in the body, then generosity must be its capstone. The culmination of service and ministry in the body is to shine with all that is generous and caring.

We are to share of our time, talents, and treasures to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is to be seen in both functional ministries as well as in our ministry of benevolence to one another. I do not believe the scope of this verse is limited to caring for needs only in terms of financial means. The Greek word for "contribute" in the ESV has the meaning of sharing and partnering with. It is the word "koinoneo" and is another form of the word "koinonia", which is not unfamiliar to modern ears as meaning fellowship. The generosity present in our ministries is not just to be for immediate and individual needs, but encompasses a fuller and joyful partnership that is ongoing.

From this verse we also see that our generosity is also to be seen in the quality of hospitality to one another. The sense here is that within the body we are to practitioners of hospitality. We are to love and pursue a depth of kindness that is inviting and welcoming; and the text makes it clear that such kindness applies especially to caring for strangers in our midst. The weight of this command is seen in the word "seek", which instructs us to be active in the pursuit of kindness. As if we were hunting, searching, or running after that which we prize and desire.

This is a quality that is to be the hallmark of our ministries. Exhibiting a care for people and a kindheartedness towards others in the midst of the work we do. It is a priority for people first, over and above the basic tasks to be done. It is seen in our deacons patiently staying late after a service to allow brothers and sisters to fellowship or conduct a meeting, never mentioning or grumbling about their stomach growling and the game or show on television that they are missing. It is our ladies joyfully preparing and setting out food for others to eat while they labor hungry and tired in the background. It is people gladly opening up their homes, resources, and wallets to meet the need of another without a thought to what it will cost them.

Let's close this morning with a few reflections as we consider our response to the text. First let me say that in some ways it is hard to preach a message to a body that serves so well and is so sacrificial in ministry. We have been blessed with people who give of themselves to ministry and the care of others with faithfulness, kindness, and a concern for others. Speaking for myself as well I am sure for the Elders, we deeply appreciate all that is done in ministry for the sake of Christ and this local gathering of God's people.

But scripture speaks into our life here at the Chapel with a standard that I hope challenges even the most dedicated servant. It is good to be reminded of what scripture teaches in regard to our ministry to one another. So many of you will reflect on this message and be encouraged to do more, though few would ever find your work in ministry wanting. Others may have seen areas of weakness which they may have taken for granted or need to work on, despite a general level of faithfulness in ministry. And perhaps a few have been challenged to a deeper level of engagement in ministry; to make use of their gifts and join in the work of service here at the Chapel.

Second, let us be reminded that the central means and motivation for ministry must be Christ. I know that at times it feels like we are in a children's Sunday school class where the right answer to every question is Christ. But if He is not seen or believed to be in the essence of all that we do in ministry, than truly we labor in vain. Just as this facility is not a church without the people and presence of Christ, so a ministry without Christ at its core is simply an empty stream lacking the flow of life and grace needed to please God and serve His people.

Let me conclude with one final reflection. Let us consider our heart's inclination toward the work of ministry. Do we embrace ministry as a work of love and care for our brothers and sisters in Christ? Do we fit ministry into life or do we balance life to allow for ministry in a way that would be seen as sacrificial service? Are there wrong attitudes and weaknesses that we know need to be changed? Do we faithfully pray for our ministries and the ministries of others as we should? May God by His excellent mercy and grace continue to allow us to bring Him the glory and make His name great in our ministries here at the Chapel.

Let's pray...