

Romans 12

1 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.

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.

11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Sermon

I firmly believe that the reason we are here tonight is because we all in some way have found or are trying to find our particular place in the giant story of God's history. But rather than convince you of this through a sermon tonight I feel that we need to hear from people in the congregation about why they are involved in the story of Christianity. Why they want to be in the God's story. I want three people to tell us what is so great about being a Christian.

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God's involvement in the story of humankind goes like this. It don't think it's the story of sin and salvation, it is the story of a God who wants to reconcile people to himself.

We are an evil race. No doubt about it. We only need to look through the pages of history to see that humankind has a very evil streak. This is not rocket science. You don't need to be religious to see it. Most people find Hitler's killing 6 million Jews to be evil. There isn't much dispute how the slave trade was evil, there aren't many who wouldn't think sweat shops are evil. There are not many who would endorse sexual violation of children, thieving, killing a healthy person, torture, violence in the home, much of what goes on in war, mistreating people, trampling on the dignity of people, distributing illicit drugs, it's not difficult for people to see how there is evil in the human condition.

And we have a good understanding of what sin is. Sure, sin stealing and lying and hating and committing adultery and murdering someone are all sins. Sin is often defined as going against God's rules and regulations for living.

But I think it's deeper than that. I think sin is not always noticeable by an outward act. I think sin is that internal desire that seeks to put self first. There are probably numerous forms of evil, but most of the evil we encounter comes from when we think more of ourselves than we ought to. We get caught up in self-absorbed, petty power struggles where we need to be the centre of our own little universes.

This is the heart of sin. Sin is when we put our needs ruthlessly before the needs of others. Sin is when we are the first thought and God and others are the after thought. And if that is what sin is, then we are all hideously guilty.

Think about it, all the sins that we list are actually ways of shaping the world according to our own desires.

We are all guilty of this. We are all sinners because we all put ourselves first at times—probably more often than not.

Sin is revolting to God because it creates an enormous chasm between him and his creatures. God is holy and loving. We are not and relationship cannot take place when love is not returned.

What is so tragic is that we are so afflicted by self interest that we cannot see God by our own efforts. All we see is the emptiness of trying to make our lives make sense without the meaningful involvement of God. We think he is distant or disapproving, he is majestic and aloof. We don't often think he is right here right now—only a choice away.

Our society is built upon things that promise to fill holes in our lives but never do. Our existence centres around entertainment and seeking relaxation and feeling good about ourselves. But the truth is that it is rare for us to be entertained, it's not often we relax, and we don't usually feel good about ourselves in spite of all our efforts.

When our worlds revolve around us and leave God out of the equation, then we are left feeling empty. And this is the crisis of the human race. We are disconnected from God because we make ourselves more important than him. And that is what makes Sin so reprehensible for God.

Sin tears him apart because it distorts this creation that he so lovingly and carefully created. It is the result of a free choice that we have. And that choice is simple. Either, choose God or choose self. More often than not it is the latter.

Right back in the book of Genesis at the beginning of the bible the entrance of sin is described. The Fall in the garden of Eden is the story of our choice in its most simple form. God creates humans as the best and most favourite part of creation. He gives them responsibility for looking after all the earth and the bible even talks about how God walked with them in the cool of the evening. Everything was perfect, there was a relationship with God that none of us have experienced.

Adam and Eve are the first people and God gave them everything to eat in the garden except for the fruit from one tree: The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He did this to give us a moral choice. All the other choices that they had were not moral choices. This one was and this is why.

Long term love is a choice not a feeling, and long term love is the love that matters. So for us to love God we needed to be able to choose. Simply put, if we chose not to eat the fruit it showed that we loved God because we were putting his desires above our own desires. This was all there was to it. There were no other rules or regulations. Nothing like what we see straight after Moses gave the ten commandments. All these do's and don'ts listed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Nothing like that. Just one plain simple rule, "Don't eat from that tree over there."

So we did. Adam and Eve went over to the tree and got talking with the devil who suggested they eat it and when the temptation became too much

they ate the forbidden fruit. We discovered after the very first bite that we knew we could put our desires above God's desires. Our perfect relationship with God had been fractured because the trust had been broken.

And this was the entrance of evil into human existence. Ever since this point we have desired to place ourselves above God and above each other. This is the tragedy of humankind.

We have a God who loves us to bits, but because of sin he can't enjoy relationship with us because sin prevents us from giving love back. We all know how difficult it is to have a friendship with someone who is completely self-absorbed.

This is bad news because we can't solve our crisis without his help.

And nowhere is this crisis more evident than in our response to the ministry of Jesus. As he was here on earth he healed, preached, befriended, loved unconditionally all people. He stood up for the downtrodden in every walk of life, pierced through our insecurities, our false images of self worth and offered his love in the name of God. The love of God the creator. Anne's sermon this morning captured this wonderfully. God who measures the universe against the palm of his hand, offers his love to us through Jesus in human form. Up close and personal. Eye to eye, face to face—Jesus offered God's love.

But we rejected it. We couldn't handle the horror of being able to see ourselves for who we really are. The rich man couldn't handle the truth of who Jesus showed him to be and went away feeling depressed. Jesus asks us to make some big decisions and the rich man's decision was whether or not he would sell all he had and follow Jesus. He couldn't do it, he was too well defined by what he owned.

And the religious people, the equivalent of our church ministers, were deconstructed by Jesus' penetrating volley of concerns over the integrity of their faith. "Rules don't do it—love does". And they hated him for it, they hated him for exposing their "religious devotion" as actually being pride in being holier than others. They hated this so much that they plotted and schemed and implemented numerous attempts to get rid of Jesus—because the truth hurt so much.

Does it not resonate at some level with us? Does it not feel the same as they did? The truth of Jesus that exposes our pride and challenges us to invest our lives into him instead of our own dreams and passions. To find our feet resting firmly on him the rock, instead of the whims and fancies of other people's opinions?

We looked at Jesus and we stapled him to a cross and left him there to die.

It was a mockery of a trial, it was a humiliating arrest, it was a barbaric execution. He was betrayed by all who were close to him. We thought we

could triumph over him. Make no mistake that empty words of worship are as painful to God as the Judas kiss that betrayed him. But will we confront it? Will we dare to face up to the reality of the emptiness of our lives when we exclude Jesus from anything that we do? Are we prepared to lay ourselves bare before the love of God and watch as he strips us to the core of our being and then heals us with his soothing affection? That's a tough call, because inside all of us is some ugly ugly stuff. Do we not at least share in the tragedy of the cross?

So here's the good news. We can connect back with God. We can have relationship with our creator. God wants to eradicate sin from our lives so that we can be reconciled to him. Reconciliation. This is the theme of the Gospel. This is the whole point of the golden commandment: Love God, love people. God wants reconciliation, he wants to restore relationship with us. He wants us to make right with him and to do this he sent his son who died a hideous death on a cross and rose again.

We've heard that before, but have we thought about that in the context of Mark 10 where Jesus says to the disciples that he "did not come to this earth to be served, but to serve and to pay the price as a ransom for many."

And the incredible, totally mind blowing scandal of all this, is that God made himself lower than humankind by choosing to serve us. God the creator, chose to serve us. Philipians 2.6–8

who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

We often hear how God finds our sin reprehensible, and how we are all destined for hell because of our sin, and how we need Jesus because that cancels out the debt, or that Jesus carried the weight of our sins or bore the punishment that was due us or whatever other theory you might hold. But never in an evangelistic message have I ever heard that God made himself a slave to us which is I think at the heart of this cosmic story of love.

Jesus washed the disciples' feet! And Peter rightly protested that it was inappropriate, but Jesus insisted that he perform a servant's task and wash the dirt of the sewerage lined streets off their feet as they came into the house. And do you not think that he counted it a privilege? Because he didn't do it begrudgingly. He did it because he loved us and wanted to show us that true life puts others first. Jesus came to serve not be served.

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul says that he preached Christ crucified to the Corinthian church, not Christ powerful, not Christ healer, not Christ resurrected—though he saw all of these as important, but Paul chose to

preach Christ crucified. Christ the powerless. Christ the sufferer. Because it is in this that the power of the love of God is revealed.

The cross, the most vile of all the things that we have done against God is also the triumph of God's glory! Because even on the cross, even as we tried to kill God and be done with it, we thought we were getting rid of something that made us uncomfortable like taking a splinter out of our finger—even though we thought that we were rejecting God, we could not stop God from loving us. He would not stop. So much so that Jesus after all he had been through in his last breaths on the cross, in tremendous pain, in front of the jeers of the onlookers, in spite of the scathing attack of thief by his side and the satisfied looks of the priests and lawyers, Jesus cries out, at the lowest point of his entire existence, “God forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!”

What incredible love is that! So I don't think that the focus of God is the eradication of sin. I think the focus of God is reconciliation. Sin is the thing that separates us, so it must go, but it goes for the sake of God being able to have us in relationship with him.

This means that when God looks at us, he sees **us**. He doesn't see vessels of sin, he sees his beautiful creation that is wondrously and fearfully made, that has been corrupted by sin and needs to be made clean. Our sin separates us from having relationship with him, but it doesn't stop him from loving us.

I think this is staggering. And this is incredible news because many in the world that we live in are resistant to the Gospel because they can't face the prospect of confessing all the bad things they've done. They think that if they come to church we are going to make them feel stink about themselves.

So we have a sense where the church is seen as being a place where we feel miserable about ourselves—and sometimes it is, but surely this is meant to be a place where we celebrate the wonder of Jesus being crucified, making himself a slave to us, for us to see that no matter how much we try to hurt God he will still love us to bits. And surely that is where our motivation to be transformed lies.

God has demonstrated to us the true meaning of love. As we reconcile to him, which means turning our back on our sin, on our conscious acts of putting ourselves before others, as we do that then we will also become loving people too.

When Jesus died on the cross, it was the Godhead's weakest moment. Forsaken by his friends and followers and ultimately forsaken by God. Abandoned to be the loneliest man in history. But even then, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

To the horrific end we see Jesus defending us.

And because of this we catch more than a glimpse of God's love. Now we experience the divine passion for us. Some of us experience his power, some of us experience the certainty of his love.

To experience God's love is the most mind blowing and life changing thing in my life. And then through being able to read the bible finding out more and more about God's love for me, for you and for the world, is just amazing.

And this is the transformation process. When we become Christians every sinful desire doesn't simply dissolve away so that we are perfect beings. Everyday there are temptations that we need to resist. And boy do I feel the temptations. And sometimes I'm angry at God because he won't just clean me up all spic and span right now. I'm angry because he won't let me be holy and that he leaves me with that difficult **choice** to love him and love his people. Because my love for God, no matter how small and insignificant it is, must still be my choice. I may fail, but at least I am in relationship with God. I am a work in progress and I may still sin, but at least I can come back to God through what Jesus did on the cross every single time. Because God has demonstrated his faithfulness in forgiving us even when we hate him.

So this life of finding wholeness and having relationship with God is a process that we embark on with the help of the Holy Spirit, with the help of the scripture and with the help of God's community. And often this is the crunch. With the help of God's community.

The church is something that is not perfect but it is God's gift to us. We are all part of this community that God has brought into existence. We are God's hands for the world, just like we were created to be in the first place, we are the ones who are given stewardship over the world.

That means in all areas of life, not just in evangelism, or justice issues, or feeding the poor, sending out missionaries. But being a bringing God's love to our homes, relationships, jobs, the way we treat pets, the way we treat other drivers on the road, the way we treat customer service representatives, the way we treat telemarketers, the way we treat the ecosystem around us, how we speak to people—all of these areas we are charged with demonstrating God's love. It is in doing this that we will experience transformation. There's so much to talk about and so little time. But let's do this! Let's make right with God and begin to be the light that shines and shines and shines!

And if you have not made any commitment to being a follower of Jesus, of being someone who has at the very least admitted they need God more than they need sin, then a decision has to be made. It's a decision that is important for you to find any sense of meaning in this life, to find any sense of peace with the world and to have any chance at all of making right your relationship with God. If you need to make that decision, and

you want to make it tonight then there are people here who will talk about it with you, pray with you and come beside you and help you embark on the journey.

I am confident that in a congregation this size that there is more than one person who needs to make right with God. I also believe that it would be a tragedy to let this opportunity to dissolve into the week.

So I'm going to ask very simply, "Are you feeling disconnected from God and want to make right? Do you want to get back into relationship with God?" Then stand up now . . .