

"The Perfect Church"

Romans 12:9-21

May 25, 1997

I don't know if any one actually thinks they will ever find the "perfect" church but do you remember the deacon's counsel to the dissatisfied, resigning church member?

The deacon said to the leaving member: "If you find the perfect church out there, don't you join it - for it then wouldn't be perfect any longer!"

Today I want to talk about the perfect church.

And when I say "the church" I'm not talking about the organization, the facilities, or the programming -

I'm talking about the people (a group of Christians who meet together and call themselves a church)

And when I say "perfect" I'm not talking about perfection, or sinlessness, or never making a mistake -

When I say "perfect" I'm using it the way the Bible does - I'm talking about completeness, fulfillment, being all that God wants that group of people to be.

The Perfect Church is that group of God's people who are living out God's will for them individually and collectively.

Knowing the will of God is a major quest for Christians - especially young adults.

They assume that in their youth is a critical time to be thinking about God's will for their lives because they are about to select their college and/or their vocation.

Those adults who have finished their training and are already involved in careers are less likely to ask questions about God's will for their lives.

And many older adults don't want to even think about God's will for their lives because they think that if they have missed it, it's too late to do anything about it anyway.

But God through the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1&2, talking to Christians of all ages - young and old, writes:

“Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

God calls on us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so we may know and do God’s will.

But what is God’s will?

What is his will for you?

What is his will for us as a church of people?

It is no mistake that no sooner does Paul call us to understand and do God’s will then he spells out what that means.

12:1-2 Be transformed so that you may do God’s will.

12:3-8 Faithfully exercise your spiritual gift(s) for the good of others.

12:9ff Love one another and even those who abuse you.

That’s God’s will for us!

We live in a culture that judges us on what we accomplish more than on who we are.

We are judged by our productivity more than our character.

What I’m going to say next is not an indictment of our President but a sad commentary on our culture.

When asked if they think President Clinton is guilty of the moral and ethical lapses with which is charged by so many - most say “yes”.

When asked if they think that has any bearing on his being a good president most say “no”.

He is judged by productivity not character.

Even in Christianity, we judge churches far more by the programs they

seem to be accomplishing than by the Christ-likeness of the people.

BUT when we come to Romans 12 and see God's description of his will for us - it is about character and relationships - the kind of people we are and how we invest in and treat those around us.

The will of God for you and for this church is not most of all about where you live and what job you have or what size this church is or what programs we offer -

The will of God has much more to do with how we treat our spouses, our children, our parents, our co-workers, our neighbors, and the people we are sitting near right now.

Folks this is very important, we too often want to think of the will of God as some occupation we must have or as some great task we are to complete. And when we think of the will of God that way, we too easily dismiss ourselves from serious thinking about his will for us because we think either we have missed the opportunity to pursue a particular occupation or we think the task, we say is God's will, is too large for us anyway.

So because we aren't a missionary or a pastor and we don't have the natural ability to lead some great evangelical enterprise we dismiss serious reflection on the will of God for our lives.

What if you knew that regardless of how young or old you are, you could yet truly become all God wants you to be.

What if you knew that regardless your age you could still truly accomplish the will of God for your life?

The attitudes and conduct described in Romans 12:9-21 are the very heart of the will of God for you and for me and for this church.

What we will read next is an excellent description of God's will, God's goal for us.

But before we read it I want to warn you about something.

We are about to read is a description of a “perfect” Christian and a “perfect” church.

And if we don’t think correctly we can be threatened by these words rather than encouraged.

If we haven’t experienced the mercy and grace of God, if we aren’t truly Christians, trusting solely in Jesus and his death for us to make us right with God then we may view these words as what we HAVE TO DO to be good enough for God. That’s legalism.

Likewise, even if we are Christians, we may misunderstand these words and assume that here is yet another list of things we must do in order to stay in God’s favor.

Please hear me, this is not something we have to do to be good Christians - this is what we can be by God’s grace.

READ Romans 12:9-21

That’s quite a description isn’t it?

Someone might say, “I get tired just thinking about all that!

No! That’s not correct thinking.

Please hear me again, this is not something we have to do to be good Christians - this is what we can be by God’s grace.

This is a description of God’s will for each of us.

I want you to see something interesting.

And you don’t have to know Greek to find what I found.

By using an interlinear Bible where each Greek word is translated into English and I found that there are actually fewer words in Greek than in our translations. The language is almost sparse.

Romans 12:9-13

Sincere love

Shrinking from evil
Cleaving to good
In brotherly love, warmly loving one another
In honor, preferring one another
in zeal, not lazy
in spirit, burning
the Lord, serving
in hope, rejoicing
in affliction, showing endurance
in prayer, continuing steadfastly
to the needs of the saints, imparting
hospitality, pursuing

What I found interesting was that there were no commands in it. All it is, is description - description of God's will.

And what I find is a character portrait of exactly the kind of person I would like as a friend.

And I find the character portrait of the kind of person I would like to be.

And when I think about it that way, it is not threatening but very encouraging.

It's a little like kids all over this country after the Masters' Golf Tournament who picked up sticks and began hitting balls on the ground. Because they saw Tiger Woods they were challenged to be like him.

No one considers their attempts to emulate Tiger Woods as negative but as positive - an encouragement.

So here, we look at what we could be and our church could be, and we say, by God's grace I want that to be true of me and our church.

This is not a critical description of how we are falling short, but of what we

can be.

God has every expectation of us because he knows he empowers us.
This is what God has called us to be and will enable us to be.

In verses 9-21 I see the kind of people God will help us become.

Please remember, the context for this description is the grace of God to us.

God has now enabled us to respond to his desires for us.

God has made it possible for us to live for him.

This is not a self-help program but a Holy Spirit generated response to the commands of God. We are now able by God's grace!

As I have studied this passage I have tried to find an outline that Paul may have used to order the things he said.

I couldn't find an outline.

Some commentators have attempted to give the passage different kinds of structure but it seems forced.

It rather seems that Paul gives 21 rather succinct statements.

What do you suppose Paul expected the Roman Christians, the first readers of this letter, to do with this list?

As I've already said, I believe it is a description of God's will for them and for us.

I would expect then that those Christians would compare themselves with the kind of person described here and think about where it was by God's grace they needed to grow.

Can we do the same?

If this is God's will for us, what kind of progress are we making on being the kind of people he will help us become.

As I go through the list very quickly - take note of those areas where God has brought significant change in your life.

Also take note of those areas where significant change yet needs to happen.

Then most of all, select one or two areas, to which, with God's help, you will give some attention today and this week.

So here's the short course on relationships - God's will for us.

1. Love must be sincere (12:9)

God calls on us to make a decision to love each other.

To pretend to love when you have no intention of actually doing so is hypocritical and it is destructive.

But when we decide to love and act on that love even when we don't feel like it - that is sincere love.

Have you made a decision, and do you renew that decision, to actively love the people of this church?

2. Hate what is evil (12:9)

I promise to develop an abhorrence, an aversion to anything which would work toward the detriment of those I have chosen to love.

Anything that would injure another person, I now hate.

My decision to love them is so absolute that I will actively work against anything which would end up harming them.

3. Cling to what is good (12:9)

The word "cling" is a word that means a sticking, a bonding to, something.

I have determined to be glued to whatever will help those I love.

Just as I abhor evil so I will cling to good.

I will find out what helps and encourages that other person and I will develop that and use it for their good.

4. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love (12:10)

"Devoted" means a natural affection for relatives particularly a parent for a child.

"Brotherly love" refers to the love of brothers and sisters for each other.

It means to have a warm, tender affection for each other.

It has to do with choosing to love others with that kind of love and spending the time for it to develop.

5. Honor one another above yourselves (12:10)

It means to have such affection for others that I place their interests ahead of my own.

Further it means to out-do each other in showing honor for each other!!

It is shown in the use of my free time, the use of my discretionary income, and the way I speak of others - honoring others

6. Never be lacking in zeal (12:11)

The word "lacking" can also be translated "lazy".

And "zeal" has to do with diligence, an enthusiastic attention to something. You will not allow yourself to lose your energy for loving others.

Or as Paul said it to the Galatians: "Do not lose heart in doing good"

It has to do with perseverance - not allowing ourselves to let down in the pursuit of Christ and his will.

Not allowing a slothful mindset toward the things of God to go unchecked.

7. Keep your spiritual fervor (12:11)

By the Spirit be passionate about this issue of serving the Lord in this way. Mentally fan into flames, call on God daily to help, recommit yourself to your desire you actively love people.

8. Serving the Lord (12:11)

Remember that your love for others is rooted in your love for the Lord.

If you will remember that it is Jesus you are also loving when you love others, it makes it easier to love the otherwise unlovely.

Jesus said when you actively love someone you are loving Him.

Chuck Colson recalled the following incident:

The Anacostia section of Washington D.C. is a ghetto of hunger, crime, drugs, and hopelessness.

Few of Washington's celebrities and power brokers cross from the Capitol to this part of town.

One morning however, black limousines and television trucks lined the curb in front of an old church in the heart of Anacostia.

They waited for a wisp of a woman in a muslin sari.

The celebrity they wanted to interview was the elderly Albanian nun known to the world now as Mother Theresa.

Since she didn't come to them, the cameras and interviewers came to her.

"What do you hope to accomplish here" someone shouted.

"The joy of loving and being loved" she smiled into the camera lights.

"That takes a lot of money doesn't it" another reported queried.

The more money something costs the more important it is in Washington.

Mother Theresa shook her head and said, "No, it takes a lot of sacrifice."

The press was bewildered - they are accustomed to grandiose plans and huge budgets and trumpeting it all to the press.

But her message was simple: "Do something for someone else - love them".

A man in her ministry came to her complaining that his boss was interfering with his ability to do his ministry.

He said, "My vocation is to work for the lepers. I want to spend myself for them.

Mother Theresa stared at him and then gently said, "Your vocation is not to work for the lepers, your vocation is to belong to Jesus."

The reminder is potent. Love for others will become less burdensome when we remember it is the way we show our love for the Lord.

9. Joyful in hope (12:12)

Remember what is in store for those who love God! Your future is controlled by God not by your present circumstances.

In Romans 8 Paul wrote, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Or as he said it to the Galatians, "in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary."

Retiring missionary couple who had spent 40 years in a different country.

"You're not home yet!" Fixing our eyes on the real goal makes all the difference.

10. Patient in affliction (12:12)

Having your hope fixed securely on the future that Jesus promises can allow you to be patient in affliction.

Even when things get rough, your eye is so fixed on Jesus and your mind so convinced of his promises that you wait through anything.

So convinced are you that you don't question God - You patiently wait for his timing and his results.

11. Faithful in prayer (12:12)

We know our prayers make a difference because of the God we believe in. And when our hope is anchored in Jesus we can pray even when we don't see the results.

12. Share with God's people who are in need" (12:13)

"Share" can mean empathizing with someone and giving to meet their needs.

But the suffix attached to the word signifies a "generous" sharing.

Acts 2 makes it clear that such "sharing" in the early church had to do with material possessions.

This description then is of a Christian who generously gives to meet the needs of others.

Brother-in-law - Had nothing. 15 year old car that was beaten up and too small. Given an 8 year old car and instead of selling the older one he gave it to a young couple who had even less.

13. Practice hospitality (12:13)

The word "hospitality" means to love strangers.

The word "practice" has the added emphasis of pursuing it!

We are not just to respond when some stranger seeks our help but we to go out looking for opportunity.

Looking for opportunity to express concern and care for a stranger.

That may be a neighbor you don't know well or at all, someone new in church, an international student. It has to do with opening up the circle of our relationships and letting others in.

14. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse (12:14)

Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Paul knows the human temptation to wish ill on those who dislike us and abuse us and so he calls for a sure antidote - blessing them - calling to God (pray) to truly bless them.

Not just asking God to make them nicer to you or just to go away but asking God to bring good on them.

Someone is out to get you and your attitude and conduct is to bless them. WOW!

Active prayer for those who like us least.

15. "Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn" (12:15)

Genuine empathy - feeling what they feel.

Making yourself enter into their experience.

Caring so much about the other person that you want to share in their experience to encourage them.

L.K. Time and feeling - He heard and cared.

16. "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." (12:16)
Pride and conceit are particularly virulent social diseases - they destroy unity and utterly hinder fellowship.

We seek out the bright, the beautiful, the apparently successful and try to spend time with them.

The troubled, the apparently unsuccessful are left standing alone.
It is our pride that does that.

Or the reverse happens. We look at those who have more education or more possessions and we want nothing to do with them - our pride gets in the way, we feel insecure and we won't reach out to love them.

But Paul says, Don't let pride get in the way - reach out in all directions.

17. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right" (12:17)
You ask a child why he hit another child and you will often hear

“because he hit me.”

Another driver cuts us off in traffic and we watch for our turn to cut him off.

Someone hurts us with words or actions and we lay awake at night rehearsing exactly what we will say the next time we get an opportunity.

Love says, “No. - I will instead do what is right - what is good, what is an expression of Christ’s kind of love and do it as unto the Lord.

18 “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (12:18)

We are to take the initiative even if peace is not always possible.

Who are we at odds with?

How long since we have taken initiative to engage them again and express our care?

Do we have something against someone that we have not just forgiven or taken to them - but instead we harbor animosity toward them?

Will you take the initiative?

19. “Do not take revenge but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord”. (12:19)

Vengeance is God’s prerogative.

When we seek revenge - be it ever so slight - we are usurping God’s rightful place -we are making ourselves God in that situation.

That becomes a greater offense than our enemy’s sin against us.

20. “If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” (12:20)

Your kindness will lead to an inward sense of shame and possibly repentance. They are coals that tend toward healing not retribution.

21. "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. (12:21)
If we curse (instead of bless), if we repay evil for evil (instead of living at peace) and if we seek revenge (instead of treating the evil one kindly) then we have been sucked into the same kind of action which they exhibit. We have been overcome by evil.

Revenge is a major theme in much of the movie and television programming. There is much around us and in us to lead us that way - don't let it overcome you but overcome it with love.

Instead, if we bless, live at peace and give to those who are evil we overcome evil with good.

Nothing is so powerful as kindness.

Minds can resist argument

Wills can resist coercion

But hearts melt when warmed with genuine love.

That's the list - what will you do with it?

Christian, do not ever again wonder what the will of God is for you.

And no matter what age we are this will of God can become true of us.

Can you imagine what would happen if all the Christians of this congregation determined to reflect this kind of love for one another and others?