

<sup>33</sup> Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!

<sup>34</sup> “Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?”

<sup>35</sup> “Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay them?”

<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform 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.

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. <sup>4</sup> For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

-- Romans 11:33-12:8

Someone once said that the Gospel is a way of seeing. It’s appropriate, then, that the original followers of Christ weren’t known as “Christians”, but as “followers of the Way.” Over the centuries since we were first contemptuously called “little Christs”, the word “gospel”—“*euangelion*”, or “good message” in Greek—has had its meaning diluted. The question for many of us today is “*do we really believe it’s good news?*” You might ask “*is what good news?*”? Is the resurrection of Jesus good news? Sure. Is the presence of the Holy Spirit with us good news? Yes. But definitions of the Gospel of Christ as “Jesus dying for our sins” are too narrow for a world that first of all doesn’t know what sin is and second, is starving for good news it understands. In the passage we have just read, we are invited to consider that the good news the world has been waiting for begins with the historical

work of Jesus, but doesn't end there. That "someone" who said the Gospel is a "way of seeing" hit on the central truth of the good news of Scripture—that God is saving everything through Jesus Christ.

It takes more than a new set of eyes to see what's going on in the ministry of Jesus, though. It takes a new understanding, a new mind. This is what Paul is after here.

We tend to apply these verses individually. We read them and say "*I need to think differently—that's the missing ingredient to living a transformed life*" and then walk away. But believing this often enslaves us to frustration when we *can't* think differently: not about God, not about ourselves, and definitely not about the world. However, if we read these verses well, we understand that a transformed mind is the result of seeing how God acts in the world he loves in order to save it. When we read these verses in the context of how God is making for himself a new people in and under the name of Jesus, we begin to be transformed by the way we are gathered as this people. We start *thinking* in new ways once we see how God is *acting* in new ways.

The backdrop of this passage are the preceding passages in Romans where Paul talks about how God's plan to reform Creation occurs through the work of Jesus. Out of two groups, one a chosen family and the other not, God is now making one people in Jesus. The result, Paul writes, is one new nation, one new tribe—the family of God.

We need to keep this context in mind when we read chapter 12 because if we don't, we're in danger of missing the point. Especially since verse 1 begins with a "therefore", we're to get the sense that everything Paul has written to this point is now building to this. When we read "therefore" in the text, we immediately need to ask "what's it there for?" In this case, Paul is leading into a new discussion of how we are to live in light of the great plan of redemption that God has finished in Jesus. "*Therefore,*" Paul writes, "*I urge you all in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.*"

God's mercy is our starting point. Today I chose to reach back a little further from chapter 12 into the hymn of praise that Paul offers up in chapter 11 because we need to start here with a remembrance of what God has done and is doing. God's plan acted out in real history by the work of Jesus is the story we tell over and over again, and when we place our lives in Christ, we become a part of God's story. It's as people of this true story that we move forward as participants with Jesus in the redemption of all things. God's will is acted out in history, and part of what it means to be Christian is to have our horizons broadened by seeing this big picture.

The question of "how do I know God's will" is often a misplaced one. We want to know what car to buy, where to educate our children, what school to apply to and what job to pursue. If we had it our way, we'd also want to know which breakfast cereal to eat, who's going to win the Stanley Cup, and which church to go to. We like quoting Jeremiah 29:11 because it talks about God having plans for us and we go to sleep at night snuggling with the hope that we will prosper and not be harmed.

But knowing God's will—at least, as far as it's mentioned in Scripture—has a lot less to do with the particulars of our lives and more to do with understanding *how* God acts in the world and then going to do likewise. Yes, God does care for us and he *does* care about the small things. However, knowing the will of God has more to do with learning how to love him and love each other than it does with entering trances and reading tea leaves. It's out of this love for God and for our neighbours that we seek the healing and wholeness of everyone and everything. Being God's children doesn't mean trying to plunder God of eternal life and then going to do whatever we want. Rather, the life everlasting is a matter of enjoying God and glorifying him forever—something we start doing now on this side of death and continue on when we are raised to life again.

There's a bit of jargon I grew up hearing and using: "being in God's will"—as if God's will was some sort of ray of sunshine that you could stand in and be happy or stand outside of and be cold.

Or else God's will was like a set of railroad tracks, the steely road to heaven. Only, we needed to be careful of derailment—a disaster for us little tank engines. We need to move away from thinking of God's will as some script we need to stick to or else we get tossed out of the Kingdom. Instead, it's better to see that God's ways and plans are for the whole of Creation, and allow the story of how he goes about working it to sweep us off our feet. The vital step we need to make, however, is to offer ourselves and be willing to be led into non-conformity with the way of the world for the sake of its transformation.

The strange thing is, when we take our eyes off ourselves and the way we want to go and fix our eyes on where God is going and how he's doing it, our callings become clearer. Our ordinary lives become extraordinary opportunities for new life. When we realize that we are not the center of the universe and quit angling to make life conform to our expectations, the world opens up, and we become aware of how we are inextricably linked with how God works in the world through *his people*.

That's something that doesn't get a lot of play in our individualistic society. We tend to want everything our way, and are so used to being consumers that we look at churches and congregations the same way we look at drive-thru windows: "*feed me*". All around the world this morning, people are attending worship services to "be fed", which is ironic because there isn't much mention of "making sure you get fed" in the New Testament. But there *is* a lot of talk in the Bible about feeding others, about clothing them, about serving them and washing their feet.

*"But that's just inside the church,"* you might say. *"It's nice that if you have a gift of teaching and of prophesying you'll get to use it within the Church. But I want to know what God's will is for me outside the church."* To that, we need to point out that verses 4-8 imply that we aren't just undifferentiated stem cells milling about in a tissue culture. We're a body, and each one of us has a role to play within the Body. The Body as a whole, then, does the work of God in the world. Not just

the fingers. Not just the knuckles. Not just the feet or the legs or the hip flexors. The *whole* Body, gifted from within, supports each member as they carry out their tasks. The *whole* Body is caught up in the story of God saving Creation.

Does this mean God isn't active in the world outside the Church? Sure he is. There are always stories of how people come to faith in Jesus without another person witnessing to them. But by and large, the Church is the people of God—and yet this people need to be gathered, trained, and mobilized for the mission of God in the world. This Body needs discipline, teamwork, and vision. This is what we call discipleship—a word you have gotten to know well if you have been a part of our church for any length of time.

The famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth was the one who said that the Gospel is “a way of seeing.” But, with all respect for Barth, he doesn't go far enough. The Gospel is more than just the way we see things. It's also the way we hear, the way we touch, the way we move in the world such that the good news of God's redemptive plan is brought to light. And we, as a people who belong to a Body, now work with transformed minds that decide every day that we follow Jesus not out of the world, but *into* it, just as he goes into it by being born in a stable some two thousand years ago. And now, we work alongside and with him as he heals the brokenhearted and sets the captives free.

Does this sound too grand? Does it sound too good to be true? Maybe so, but it only sounds too big to comprehend because we only see ourselves and our limited abilities. We think, “*what can I possibly do to spread the shalom of God?*” The truth is, not much. There is nothing terribly impressive about me or any of us when you get down to it. Yet if we offer ourselves as jars of clay to carry the treasure of the Gospel, God fills us and uses us in ways we sometimes cannot see. You and I might feel useless and alone in how we commit ourselves to the Kingdom of God, but the truth is that when we wholly commit ourselves to the pursuit of Christ for the love of the world, we are part

of the larger movement of God. We become a part of the Body of Christ working in the world to save it.

Most of us here are content with quiet lives—and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that. A meaningful job that pays well, a loving spouse, bright and happy children, a comfortable house in a safe part of town—these are all blessings that came to you by God’s grace and pleasure. And yet, our lives together in Christ are so much more than this. As we give ourselves, we begin to experience life not as drudgery and moving from one met-expectation to the next, but as an adventure story in which we are transformed into lovers like Jesus. You and I are not only keepers of the story, but are characters within it. Our names are written in the book of life, and one day, we’ll recount how we lived out our callings with courage and honour. Our non-conformity to the ways of the world flows out of our transformation into the people of God. It’s as brand new people with new motives, new tastes, and new desires that we pursue God’s calling for us and have our daily lives transformed by the way we see ourselves.

Out of this new way of seeing, our Kingdom callings emerge. Suddenly, we’re no longer just stay-at-home moms, we are guardians of God’s unformed people. We are no longer just health care providers, we are ministers of the wholeness of God—and when the time comes, we help people die with dignity and peace. We are no longer teachers or students or worker bees at office jobs—we are princes and princesses of the coming Kingdom, and we live reflecting the love and grace that God has shown to us. We are no longer as we once were, and we show it in the way we live. This is in the hope that all who meet Jesus through us might call on him, and so be brought from death into life.

1.) How is God changing you?