

Building a Contagious Community

Culture of Grace: Habits and Practices of GracePoint Church / Romans 12:1-16

Introduction:

If you are a guest with us, we have been studying the gospel of Mark and reached the turning point of Mark's gospel at the end of chapter 8. We will be taking a break from Mark until the new year to spend some time in the Old Testament studying the book of Jonah, and learning from the Psalms, before we celebrate the Advent season in December. But before we begin our study in Jonah, we will cover two more aspects of a series we call Culture of Grace that encourages habits and practices we want to prioritize at GracePoint church. Over the next two weeks, we will look together at what it means to be members of a church and how we are gifted to serve. Our passage today is Romans 12:1-16, which will help us understand why we want to prioritize building a contagious community here at GracePoint. The early church stood out in society because of its distinct community, as a people bound together by the gospel. Tim Keller describes it as, "a counterculture that was both offensive and yet also attractive to many." Keller goes on to say, "It was because the early church didn't fit in with its surrounding culture, but rather challenged it in love, that Christianity eventually had such an effect on it" (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/5-features-early-church-unique/>). Now, when we think of being counterculture, we are tempted to focus solely on standing against some of the evils of our current culture like abortion, gender identity politics, and same sex marriage. While these are things we should stand firmly against through the truth of God's word, Romans 12 calls the church to a deeper and more far-reaching countercultural identity of holiness and love, that forms a contagious community of people. We will cover a lot of ground this morning to see the overarching flow of Paul's argument in this passage. My aim this morning is to show you how Paul's flow of argument points to a radical concept of church membership that goes beyond giving and voting and will transform our community if we can embrace it. First, look at the call Paul gives in verses 1-2, to,

Respond to God's Mercy with Purposeful Sacrifice

Verses 1-2 set an important foundation for what comes after them in verses 3-16. Chapter 12 marks a typical transition in Paul's writing, where he moves from focusing primarily on theological truths about the gospel in chapters 1-11 to how those truths practically change our lives in chapters 12-15. Look at the way verse 1 begins, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God." Stop there. Paul's appeal is grounded in a strong "therefore" showing a conclusion is being made to what has been written. Most scholars rightly suggest this therefore is not pointing only to the end of chapter 11, but the entirety of the first 11 chapters. Then, Paul qualifies what he specifically has in mind, saying, "by the mercies of God." So, Paul is saying, because of all the mercies of God I have disclosed to you up to this point. So, before we look at the call, consider a brief overview of Romans 1-11. In chapter 1, Paul disclosed the gospel to be the power of God to save Jews and Gentiles from His just and holy wrath against sin. In Chapters 2-3, Paul showed that God's wrath and judgement is towards all mankind because no one is righteous, and all have fallen short of God's glory. Yet, God provided a righteousness through Christ that secures grace and redemption for all who call on Jesus in faith. In chapters 4-5, Paul disclosed how faith clings to God's promised hope and peace that comes from the reconciliation we can have with God given through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as all who believe are united to Him. Romans 6-7 revealed how our union with Christ has given the power to overcome sin's captivity and faithfully pursue righteousness. Romans 8 disclosed the beautiful mercies of God that removes condemnation, gives hope in future glory, and keeps us from ever being separated from the love of Christ. Romans 9-11 revealed God's faithfulness to His promises and continued mercy on the people of Israel as proof of that faithfulness. This is the gospel. These are the mercies of God that Paul appeals to us in light of.

Everything we are called to do after this rests on God's redemptive accomplishments in Christ. Do you know the mercies of God? If you do, look at the call then in verses 1-2, "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." The call is strong, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." This means to present all of yourself as an ongoing sacrifice to God, and strive to be holy, set apart to God. Notice that this is an act of worship. Then, in verse 2, he isn't giving a new thought, but describing this in more detail. Paul says don't continue to live your life in the ways of this world but be transformed. And that transformation comes through a renewal of your mind, a renewal of the way you think. This means the way to avoid being conformed to the world is to think differently. And the purpose statement shows us what that thinking involves. It involves testing and discerning the will of God to see things that are good, acceptable, and perfect. The word for testing means to approve of something that is valuable. The idea is akin to sifting for gold. God's will is always good, acceptable, and perfect and you are sifting to find that treasure. The renewal of our minds helps us discern it and prove it to be as valuable as it truly is. Notice this is a purposeful process. Renewing our mind helps us not be conformed to the world and present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Church, this doesn't come by simply trying harder, but by truly understanding the abundant mercies of God. When we dive into God's word, we discover God's abundant mercies and perfect will. Our minds are renewed, our hearts are filled with those truths, and our lives are transformed. So, the practical question is, are you seeking to renew your mind on the truths of God and His mercy? Or do you fill your life and minds with other things? Then, after Paul gives the call to respond to God's mercy with purposeful sacrifice, he starts to flesh out what that looks like. First, in verses 3-8, Paul shows that renewing our minds means,

A Humble Recognition of Our Lives in Relation to the Church

To really see Paul's flow of thought, we have to pay close attention to how Paul ensures we understand the way verses 3 and following connect with verses 1-2. Notice the connections in verse 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." Paul begins with the word "for" signifying he is giving a reason for what he just said. And notice the emphasis on how we think. This means that part of what it looks like to be transformed by the renewal of your mind is thinking rightly about yourself, with sober judgement, according to God's assigned measure of faith. There are a few possibilities for the meaning of the end of verse 3. The first is that God assigns varying measures of faith to believers. The second is we should think of ourselves in accordance to the common faith God has given to all. The third is to notice the connection to spiritual gifts after this and see God's measure of faith as connected to the different gifts He supplies to various people. I lean towards the second or the third meaning, but whichever meaning it is, the point remains the same. Don't think too much of yourself because ultimately God's mercy has provided everything for you. Verses 4-6 continues this idea but go further to reveal a deeper truth. Look there with me, "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. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." Pause there. We will consider spiritual gifts next week and stick only to Paul's main argument in these verses. Notice again the word "for" signifying verses 4 and following are reasons for verse 3. The reason to think humbly is because of these truths. First, that we are one body in Christ and members of one another. The beginning of verse 4, Paul gives a metaphor of the human body to communicate what this means. Consider your body. You have hands, feet, eyes, elbows, etc. Each part is a member of your body and each part has a distinct function. The hand doesn't do the same thing as the eye. Nor the feet the elbows. Just like our human bodies, the church is one body with members of one another. Church, think about what this means.

It means, once you are in Christ, by faith, you are defined by your relation to the church around you. Church, you are no longer an individual person anymore. You are one body in Christ, with Christ as the head. You are connected through Christ to all those around you who are united to Christ in His death and resurrection. Second, being members of one body, means you are a functioning part of a body. And this is accomplished in a local expression of the church because our gifts are used in the context of the church. Verses 7-8 shows examples of how to use particular gifts, which we will consider next week. For today, do you see the connection of this to verses 1-2? Paul is saying that renew our minds and presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice means humbling striving to be a functioning part of the church, which is the body of Christ. Are you connected to GracePoint Church or another church in the same way your arm is connected to your body? Have you recognized that is part of what God calls you to when He calls you to be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to Him? There more to see from Paul's flow of thought in this chapter. After pointing us to have a humble recognition of our lives in relation to the church, Paul continues to show what a living sacrifice looks like, in verses 9-21, revealing it to mean,

A Priority to Live Together in Faith-filled Love

Our focus this morning is on verses 9-16 that concentrate on admonitions for our relationships with those in the body of Christ, with the possible exception of verse 14, where verses 17-21 concentrate on relationships with those outside the church. We see through their connection to verses 3-8 with the repetition of "one another" in verses 9 and 16. Consider these verses in pairs with me. Notice the focus in verses 9-10, "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." It's no surprise that love is the first admonition. Love comes first in the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Love undergirds all use of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 13. Jesus says people will know we are His disciples by our love for one another. Love should permeate the community of the church and Paul says it should be genuine. The term for genuine translates the Greek word *anypokritos*, meaning 'without hypocrisy'. Our love should never be hypocritical but sincere, and sincere love hates what is evil but clings to what is good. True Christian love cannot rejoice in evil. It won't tolerate any kind of evil because it holds fast to all that is good. Paul then almost repeats the command to love with greater strength, calling us to "love one another with brotherly affection." He uses two terms that point to the kind of love that typically exists between a parent and a child. Parents, think of your love for your kids. Or kids, your parents. That is the love we should have for one another. The last thing we see in this pair is to "outdo one another in showing honor." The idea is to prefer one another by seeking to honor them. The humility spoke of in verse 3 will exist in hearts who seek to honor and prefer others. Look at the next pair in verses 11-12, "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." Remember, these are in the context of living in relationship with those in the church. The first three build on each other, starting with a negative exhortation and leading to a positive one. Don't be lazy in your zeal for Christ and His kingdom but be fervent in spirit. Many suggest "be fervent in spirit" might be best translated as "be set on fire by the Spirit of God." The build ends with "serve the Lord." If you are filled with zeal for Christ, and burning with the Spirit of God, you will serve the Lord faithfully. Don't miss this church. When service is lacking, it can be directly correlated with a lack of zeal for God and filling of the Spirit. Do you think your faith is strong? How are you serving the Lord? Paul, then gives another triplet focused on hope, patience and prayer. Life together in the church involves finding joy in the hope we have in Christ, being patient in our trials and difficulties, and constantly praying. I believe hope and constant prayer are the key to patience in tribulation. We should be constant in prayer, even before the trial comes, filled with joy in hope, even before times get hard. True joy in the hope of Christ, and constantly praying, are what prepare you to be patient in tribulation. Note again the context show this is connected to being members of one another.

This means your joy-filled hope, your patience in tribulation, your constant prayer is not only for you, but could be what the person next to you needs, because you are members of one another. This also means your lack of hope, lack of patience, and lack of prayer could also a detriment to the body around you. When our eyes are not set on the hope of Christ, this body will suffer. When we are not patient and participate in gossip and other sins, this body will suffer. When we don't pray, this body will suffer. Are you seeing the importance of building this kind of community at GracePoint? Let's keep going, look at verses 13-14, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." The Greek verb for "contribute" is *koinōneō*, which means fellowship with, or take part in. The idea is deeper than just giving to someone in need. As John Murray says, "The meaning... would be that we are to identify ourselves with the needs of the saints and make them our own" (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 455). We, as one body, make the needs and sufferings of others our own. Their needs become our needs. Paul also says we seek to show hospitality. The verb for "show" implies strenuous effort. We should passionately pursue ensuring everyone feels welcomed as family. Can you imagine how contagious our community would be if we could own these two things? Paul keeps going, calling us to "Bless those who persecute you." Church feel the weight of this. It isn't saying just bear under people's persecution. It is saying, go a step further and bless them. Then Paul doubles down, "bless and do not curse them." As Murray and other commentators point out, blessing actually means we "invoke God's blessings on them (cf. Luke 1:64, 68; 2:28; 24:53; James 3:9)" (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 455). This is not what we naturally do when we experience persecution, or even simply hurtful things. We usually curse the people. Church, I am not immune to this. I've had a battle raging in my heart recently not to curse others as I have heard about some hurtful things people are spreading. Sadly, my knee jerk reaction has been to curse them. By God's grace, the Spirit exposed this but it was there for a moment. Praise God for the cross of Christ! When I read this verse, I knew I was called to pray for God to bless them with His grace instead. This has not been easy, but God has been merciful in meeting me with the grace I need to do this. How do you respond to these kinds of things? Oh, how I have wondered what would happen if we could grab onto this truth. We have a few more things to see. Look at verses 15-16, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight." Verse 15 calls us to share in the joy and sorrow of others. Yet sometimes we are so consumed with our own mess that we don't even consider others. Other times, we respond to people's joy in the church by becoming jealous of them instead of rejoicing with them. Sometimes we are burdened when people in the church are sorrowful. Or worse, we may be happy because we feel vindicated that "they are getting what they deserve." Church, none of things should ever take place in the church, because we are members of one another. Finally, Paul comes back to being clothed in humility towards those in the body of Christ in verse 16. When calling for us to "live in harmony with one another," Paul uses a term for a unity of mind. He is saying think with the same renewed mind that will lead to a harmony with others. And this bleeds into the final admonitions to not be proud, self-exalted, or wise in your own site. Pride moves us to think place ourselves above others in social status or intellect. Church, fight the temptation to assume anything you have is not a gift from God. and joyfully associate with anyone God brings into our fellowship. John Stott concludes this section well saying, "What a comprehensive picture of Christian love Paul gives us! Love is sincere, discerning, affectionate and respectful. It is both enthusiastic and patient, both generous and hospitable, both benevolent and sympathetic. It is marked by both harmony and humility. Christian churches would be happier communities if we all loved one another like that" (John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, 333).

Conclusion:

My hope is that we can see the call of Romans 12 and build a contagious community like this at GracePoint. And today, we will reflect on these things through communion. Communion is a time to reflect deeply on Christ's death for you, but it also has a communal aspect to it. We take it together because we are joined together through that very death and resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-28, Paul gives a strong warning as we approach communion saying, "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." Paul says we should be careful not to partake of communion in an unworthy manner, but to examine ourselves rightly. This doesn't mean you need to recount every sin you have committed and confess it before taking. The context of this passage reveals the problem was that, instead of remembering and worshipping Christ for His sacrifice, they came together in division with each other, focused on eating food, and lacked care for the church. This is why Paul reminds of what communion means in 1 Corinthians 11:24-26. Communion remembers Christ's body broken and His blood shed for us. Communion proclaims the Lord's death as our only hope until He comes. Now, look at 1 Corinthians 11:29, and how it connects to verse 27 "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." The problem was not discerning "the body." In the context of this passage, the body is the body of Christ that was broken for us. Their lack of discernment wasn't their bodies, it was not discerning the body of Christ broken for them. Taking communion in an unworthy manner, without examining yourself, means you take communion without thinking on and treasuring Christ's sacrifice for you. You don't remember and confess your need of Christ's atoning sacrifice for your sin. So, as the worship team is coming up, let me encourage you to take time to reflect on Christ's body broken. Reflect on the mercies of God and your response to the admonitions we have seen today. We have 3 songs prepared to provide an extending time of reflection, to give ample time to examine if our hearts are focused on Jesus Christ, trusting in His sacrifice, and loving His church before taking communion. Spend time during these songs meditating on the sacrifice of Christ and what it means for you and those around you. Proclaim His death through song, and then I will come back up for us to take communion together. Let's pray as we lean into God's grace.