

*The Sacrifice of Your Sleeping, Eating,
Going-to-Work, Walking-Around, Everyday, Ordinary Life'
Part 4 – The Shape of Our Lives
Romans 12:3-8*

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 25, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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³For 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.

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Romans 12:3-8, NRSV)

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Last night was Saturday night which meant that all around our city many people consumed more alcohol than they probably should have consumed and, with impaired judgment, many of those same people made estimations about themselves and their abilities that they normally would not have made. As we all know, that's what alcohol does to you when you consume too much of it. It impairs your judgment. You make promises you can't keep. You boast about things you can't back up. You go places you otherwise might not go. You get behind the wheel of a car confident that you can drive home when, in fact, you have no such ability.

In verse three of our passage today Paul urges us to think about ourselves with "sober judgment". He's not talking about getting drunk on wine, however, but getting drunk on pride. He's urging humility. And his choice of the word "sober" is a good one because when you are sober you are careful not to overestimate yourself. He's reminding us that in pride we ought not to overestimate our abilities or accomplishments because at the end of the day how much credit can we really take for things? My life itself is a gift; I didn't bring it about. My salvation is a gift; I didn't earn that either. My abilities and opportunities, they're gifts as well. Every good thing we have is a gift from God, our Father in Heaven who loves to give good gifts to his children. So when you think about your life, make sure to maintain sober judgment.

Keep this truth in mind for a moment.

The message Paul is giving us here in Romans 12, a message we're taking several weeks to explore, is that God is at work transforming our world and is beginning that transformation with us. Remember, the message of the Christian Gospel is not merely that God wants to get us to believe all the right things, or make us into nice people, or even to take us to heaven someday when we die. It's bigger than that! *The message of the Christian Gospel is that God, through Christ, is at work redeeming and transforming the entire cosmos.* God intends to make right everything that is wrong in the world. His goal is not to whisk us away to heaven someday but to bring heaven to earth – "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

But here's the most surprising part of it all – and the part where we need to heed Paul's warning to maintain sober judgment – Jesus wants to do all of this through us, through his followers, through the church! Our calling in this life as Christians is to join with **God in the redemption and the transformation of the entire cosmos.** Can you imagine? Next time somebody asks you what you do, try telling them, "Well, I spend my days at an accounting firm, but my real work in this life is joining God in the redemption and transformation of the entire cosmos." And they'll say, "Wow. Is that a salaried position? Do you need a business degree for that?"

¹ I've shamelessly stolen this title from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 12:1 in *The Message*.

As fantastic as it might seem, this is God's call for us in this life. Paul puts it this way saying that we are **“one body in Christ.”** Elsewhere, in I Corinthians 12:27, Paul writes to the church, **“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”** All through his writing Paul chose this metaphor to help us understand how much we are to be a part of what God is doing in this world. God is redeeming and transforming the world and *the church is his body* through which this will be accomplished.

Let's think about it this way. 2,000 years ago God came to earth in the person of Jesus to redeem and transform the world. When he did, he took on a human body. Right? Jesus was divine but his body was not. His body was human. This was the incarnation, the eternal Word becoming flesh. You see, for whatever reason God didn't choose to just wave his hand over the world to fix things. Nor did he send some invisible force, like magic, or even a legion of angels to make things right. No, God's plan to redeem his creation was to come himself and enter into creation. The eternal Son took on a human body, a body which literally became the vehicle through which his saving purposes on this earth were carried out.

Think about it. When Jesus was walking around on this earth 2,000 years ago, what was his body doing? His feet literally carried him to places where people needed to hear good news about God's love and grace. His arms reached out to embrace people that others thought God would never even touch. His eyes saw beauty and goodness in places nobody was looking for such things. His ears listened to people speak about their pain. His hands touched the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf and made them see and hear again. His tears flowed for those who were lost from God. His lips spoke of the grace and truth of God in ways nobody had ever before considered. His knees bent to pray to his Father. His flesh was torn for the forgiveness of the world. You see, Jesus didn't float up among the clouds; he walked among the crowds. God's plan to save and fix our world was carried out through the literal, physical body of his Son.

So where is Jesus' body today? It's not in the grave; we know that! His body is risen! As we declared earlier in the Apostle's Creed, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born in the flesh of the virgin Mary, suffered and was crucified, died and was buried. But the third day his body – his physical body! – was raised from the dead and ascended to heaven where he is now seated at the right hand of his Father in authority over all creation. So where is Jesus' body today? Well, the body which was born in Bethlehem, walked on water in Galilee, was crucified at Calvary, and was raised on the third day, has ascended to be with the Father. When he left, however, Christ sent his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, which came shortly after the resurrection at Pentecost. And what did the Spirit of Christ do when it descended to earth? Do you remember? It took up residence in the hearts, in the lives, of Jesus' followers, the church. And once again – listen carefully! – at Pentecost, just like at Christmas, the divine presence of God came to make its home in human flesh. Do you see a pattern here?

Now, do you know what that makes us? The church, the community of men and women all throughout time and space who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as God's Son, as their Savior and their Teacher, we are now the body of Christ on this earth. We are not divine ourselves. Don't make that mistake. But we are the vehicle through which God will continue to work out his plan to redeem and transform the cosmos. That is what Paul means when he calls the church the body of Christ. The things that Jesus did on this earth through his body when he was here before, those are *the very same things* that Jesus still wants to do through his body the church today, *but to even a greater extent!*

Don't believe me? Listen to Jesus' own words in John 14:12. **“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”** Have you ever read this verse before? What an astounding claim! Jesus declared that his followers in this world – that's us, among others! – are meant to do the very things he did when he was here and, in fact, do even greater things than he did. How can this be? Has anybody in this room even come close to doing greater things in your life than Jesus did in his life? Anybody?

Honestly, I dismissed this verse for a long time because I knew that there has, in fact, never been another person in the history of the world who has done greater works than Jesus did. At this one point, I concluded, Jesus must have been mistaken. Or maybe his disciples misunderstood and wrote this one down wrong. It wasn't until somebody explained to me that Jesus isn't speaking qualitatively here, but quantitatively, that I began to understand. In other words, Jesus never expected any *one disciple* to outshine him. But collectively, together, and by his power, then yes, in some ways the body of Christ that is the church actually has done even greater works than the body of Jesus the carpenter's son from Nazareth.

Think about it, Jesus' body never walked more than 100 miles from his place of birth to proclaim the Gospel. Christ's body the church, however, has reached nearly every last corner of this planet with the good news. After three years of ministry Jesus retained only 11 disciples at his last meal and about 120 at the pre-Pentecost prayer meeting.² All of them were Jews. By contrast, after nearly 2,000 years of ministry Christ's body, the church, can count millions and millions and millions of disciples numbered from every nation on earth. When he walked through Palestine, Jesus did some miraculous things through his body which have been recorded in the Gospel accounts. By contrast, how many more miraculous things are recorded down through church history, miraculous things which have been done by Christ's body, the church?³

So let me ask you again, where is Jesus' body? At the right hand of the Father in heaven, of course. But Christ's body is also here on earth as the Spirit of Christ has filled the church and is working through us – or, at least, means to work through us – to continue God's work of redeeming and transforming the entire cosmos, us included, so that one day, when Christ returns, earth will be finally and forever made to resemble heaven in every respect. Does God need us for this work? I can't imagine that he does. But for some reason God has *chosen* us for this work, every last one of us.

Now, when you stop to consider all this it's rather overwhelming. If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, the ultimate purpose of your life is now to participate with God in the redemption and transformation of the entire cosmos, one square inch at a time. But how can this be possible? I can't even get my own mess in order. How could I even begin to think about changing all the mess in our world? Even if all of us were to work together, even if the whole world were to trust in Jesus and work together, how could we ever accomplish such a thing? We could not. And that's the point, the point which brings us back to where we started, to a sober realization of who we are and the limits of what we are capable of. In spite of our high calling, we must make sure we do not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think.

This is my favorite pair of work gloves. I've had these gloves for ten years or more and I've used them for all sorts of projects. I wore these gloves when I tore out a couple of overgrown bushes in my yard a few months ago. I wore them when I worked with my neighbor to replace the fence between our houses a few years back. I've worn them countless times to mow the lawn and yank weeds out of the flowerbeds. Just last week I used them to clean out all the leaves in my gutters. They're torn up and worn out and I keep thinking I should go buy new gloves. I even have some other pairs that are in much better shape. But I love these gloves. They fit my hands perfectly, like a glove.

Well the other day I was walking past the storage shed where I keep all my work gloves, including my favorite pair, and I overheard some chatter coming from inside. I was curious so I stopped to listen in, just outside the door where I couldn't be seen. And do you know what I heard? These old gloves, my faithful old pair of work gloves, were in that storage shed boasting to all the other less-experienced gloves. They're in there going on and on about the fence that they built one summer, and the bushes that they ripped out from the roots, and the countless weeds that they've pulled. "Never met a weed we couldn't handle!" – that's what they said.

I couldn't believe it. I could hear them in there flexing their muscles and bragging about how they possess the strength to wield sledge hammers, and push lawn mowers, and climb ladders, and yank out rose bushes thorns and all. They were taking all the credit for the transformation of my entire back yard!

Clearly, there was no sober judgment being exercised in that work shed. A pair of somebodies were thinking a lot more highly of themselves than they ought to have. But right as I was about to open the shed door and step inside to set the record straight, it suddenly occurred to me that the prideful sense of self-accomplishment I found so disdainful in my work gloves was not all that unlike a similar sense of self-accomplishment I've recognized in myself from time to time.

As a pastor I offer help to somebody in trouble and my help really seems to make a difference. I preach a sermon and people's lives seem to be impacted in a way that actually leads to real change. I come up with ideas in the church that make sense and lead to the growth of the church. I offer counsel to somebody in a way that helps them see things they never saw before. And all along the way I find a growing sense of self-admiration in my heart. I really am somebody who can make things happen in this world. How glad must God be to have me working for his team!

² See Acts 1:15

³ Dale Bruner was very helpful here in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 817-818.

Or the opposite happens. In spite of all my efforts I just can't fix somebody else's problem. The sermon falls flat. The ideas don't work out. Problems multiply more than solutions in the church. And before long I'm full of discouragement and stress because I have come to imagine that I'm responsible for all the outcomes and results which aren't turning out like I think they should. And now I imagine God must be trying to figure out how to get me off his team.

If you're honest, I bet you might recognize some of these same tendencies in your life.

And so I want you to think about your life as a work glove. Yes, it has the shape (or image, if you will) of something designed to do some heavy lifting, but on its own there is no power. A glove by itself is largely useless. At best it's a decoration. On its own it certainly can't do all the things my gloves were bragging about having done. Because the power is not in the glove but in the hand, in that which fills out the shape of the glove. And the same is true of our lives. Collectively, we have been created and called to make an eternal impact in this world. That is the shape of our lives. But on our own we have no power to do any such thing. It is only as the Spirit of Christ fills our lives with strength and power that we can do anything of lasting significance.

Do you realize that the church, as the community of Jesus' followers, is meant to take on the shape of Jesus? For one, our lives and our life together are meant to reflect the characteristics we see in his life: grace, peace, love, patience, humility, an intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father, a love of the scriptures, an ability to see the world from heaven's perspective. On top of that, as Christ's body, filled with his Spirit, we are to be doing the very things that Jesus did on this earth: leading others to a saving trust in God, hearing the voice of God in our daily lives, praying with power, teaching with authority, extending hands that carry a healing touch.

You see, as Christ's body we are meant to resemble Christ in his character and competency. But part of what keeps our lives from taking the shape of Jesus' life is our misunderstanding of grace. Too often we shrink-wrap God's grace into merely the power to forgive. God's grace comes in and, in one fell swoop, forgives us our sins and punches the ticket that will get us into heaven one day. For many Christians, that is their understanding of grace. But that's such a stunted understanding of grace. God's grace is the power of life - the power to forgive, yes, but also the power to transform, and heal, and love, and serve.

Dallas Willard puts it this way, "Grace is not just about forgiveness — if we had never sinned we would still need grace! *Grace is God acting in our life to do what we cannot do on our own.* Grace is what we live by and the human system won't work without it. Saints burn more grace than sinners ever could. The saint burns grace like a 747 burns jet fuel." Grace is the hand in the glove that gives it the shape and power to do what it was meant to do and what it cannot, even for a moment do on its own. As Jesus put it in John 15, he is the vine and we are the branches and apart from him we can bear *no fruit*. Zero.

It's what Paul is implying when he writes, "**We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.**" His point here is that God's grace will fill out the shape of our lives and do so in different ways. We're all a part of Christ's body, working together towards the same goal of the transformation of the cosmos, but we are different parts of the body which have different roles in that effort.

Some of you sitting here this morning have the gift of a prophet. The Spirit has filled you with grace and inspired you to speak on behalf of God in ways that can give real guidance to the rest of us in our day to day circumstances. The message you have been given has the power to transform hearts, and lives, and families, and communities, and so you must speak it boldly.

Some of you here have the gift of ministering. The Greek word here is *diakonia*, from which we get our word deacon. The Spirit has filled you with grace to look out for the tangible needs of others around you.

Some of you here have the gift of teaching. And so by the grace of God, keep your teaching focused on Christ. So many people around you are hungry to be nurtured in faith in this world of ours which is overflowing with lies and falsehood. God can use you to open the eyes of those who have been deceived into blindness.

Some of you here have the gift of exhortation, or encouragement. The Spirit has given you the grace – the power! - to offer friendship to those who are lonely and courage to those who have lost heart.

Some of you sitting here have the gift of generosity. And so by God’s grace, give as much as you can and do so quickly, and discreetly, and without strings attached.

Those of you who have the gift or position of leadership, you need to rely on God’s grace to use you to show people the way forward, both here in the church but also in your home and in the community.

And if your gift is compassion, as I know it is for many of you, then allow the grace of God to empower you to come alongside those who are hurting, not patronizingly or reluctantly, but cheerfully and humbly.

Now, Paul does not give an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts here. There are many more ways by which the Spirit of Christ fills and empowers the body of Christ to do the work of Christ. And so our job, each of us, is to discern how we have been uniquely called and gifted and then, by God’s grace, to give ourselves fully to that effort, doing our best but not trusting our best. As we do, especially as we do so together, we will begin to see Christ work through us and in us to expand his kingdom on this earth.

Let me leave you with one of the most beautiful images that Jesus gave us along these lines. Speaking to his disciples who were beginning to understand that they were being called to a task that greatly outdistanced their abilities, Jesus spoke these words to them one day in Matthew 11:28-30:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Too many of us here this morning are weary and worn out because we are trying to live life with the power of an empty glove. It does not work. Make no mistake, the load is too heavy, as heavy as the redemption and transformation of the entire cosmos. Even our little part of that load is far heavier than we can bear. Yet Christ is inviting us to let him do the heavy lifting. If only we would come alongside Jesus and allow him to fill out the shape of our lives, he will show us true rest and help us recover our lives. As we learn from him the unforced rhythms of grace, Christ will do this work of transformation not only in us, but through us as well.⁴

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Romans 12:3-8. What initially sticks out to you from these verses?
2. Paul says here and elsewhere in his writings that we, the church, are Jesus’ body in this world. What do you think he means by that? Do you feel like Jesus’ body?
3. In John 14:12 Jesus declares to his disciples, ““Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” Do you believe Jesus is referring to you/us here? Are we *really* meant to do greater works than Jesus did?
4. Jeff used the analogy of a glove to help us understand our role in God’s mission in this world. Was that helpful? Does your life feel empowered by the Spirit of Christ which fills it and gives it shape? How so?

⁴ I’m stealing some of the language in this last paragraph from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Matthew 11:28-30 in *The Message*.

5. Are you feeling weary and heavy burdened in your life right now? Is there something you are trying to do that is not your job to do, something which should be left up to God? How could this change?
6. Paul lists seven different examples of how the members of the body of Christ (i.e. the church) does the work of Christ in this world. Which one of these is closest to describing your role in Christ's body? How is Christ working through you in this way currently?

Prophesy/Preaching	Ministering/Serving	Teaching/Instruction
Exhortation/Encouragement	Generosity	Leadership
		Compassion

7. Could you honestly say the following today: "My true work in this world is joining God in the redemption and the transformation of the entire cosmos?" Why or why not?



Table to Table Question
A question for kids and adults to answer together

When the Bible calls the church the body of Christ, what do you think that means? What part of the body do you think you might be?