

## It's All About Oneness

I'm going to begin this morning by asking you a question, but I won't ask you to answer because it might embarrass you. After hearing last week's message about offering our bodies as *living sacrifices* to God, did you spend the week looking for opportunities as to how you could do that? How many opportunities did God give you to do that this week? How many opportunities did you let slip by? Could you answer those questions? Or would you have to say that you didn't think about it all? God places such opportunities before us each day. And if you're a believer you've got the Holy Spirit living inside of you and He will help you to offer yourself as a *living sacrifice*, but He won't do it if you don't submit your will to Him and ask Him for help.

As we began our study in Romans chapter 12 last week, we began by looking at verses one and two which we consider to be one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. In these two verses Paul describes the essential elements for life change. Is your life out of control? Are you unhappy? Do you feel you're living a meaningless existence? Do you feel unloved? Do you have problems with relationships? If you do and would like these things to improve, in two verses Paul describes the process for changing all of that and for beginning the process of becoming a person in whom the Holy Spirit of God will produce:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22, 23).

What more could anyone ask for? The Bible, by the way, refers to these things as the *fruit of the Spirit*. You can have money, power, and success and never have any of the above. In fact money, power, and success can prevent you from having those things. During the years that I was an atheist, I found myself becoming more and more miserable as I gained wealth and success. If you want a truly satisfying and blessed life, one in which God, in His mercy, gives you the nine gifts we just listed, you must follow the instructions in Romans chapter twelve. So let's briefly review Romans 12:1, 2 (NRSV), and then we'll move on:

*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.*

These verses tell us that the Gospel message brought by Jesus is a message of God's **MERCY** to undeserving sinners, in giving His Son to die for them, in saving them by faith, in sending them His life-giving Spirit, and in making them His children.

Do you want a good and simple definition of *mercy*? Suppose you were going 65 MPH down a side street and a little boy ran into the street. Your car struck and killed him. You were going 35 MPH over the speed limit. As the judge is about to sentence you to life imprisonment for negligent homicide, the boy's father steps forward and says, "*I don't want this man to suffer. I forgive him and I would like to accept his punishment myself and serve out his prison term.*" So when you think about the meaning of the mercy of God, think of what a great price He paid so that you might have eternal life.

As we studied verses 1 and 2 we learned in addition that salvation and eternal life do not depend on the desire or effort of human beings, but on God's mercy (Romans 9:16), and that God's purpose in all of this is "*to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy* (Romans 9:23)." That's you. The objects of His mercy are those that accept and trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for our sins. I know that I am an object of God's mercy because I have believed Jesus died for my sins and I have thus made Him the Lord of my life. There is nothing more important to me than following the leading of Jesus Christ.

One essential element that brings a person to such a commitment, and allows a person to be able to offer their body as a *living sacrifice* in service to God, is to be sure that their **mind has been renewed**. How does the process work? It's a two-step process. First, you must yield to the Holy Spirit as Paul indicated in chapter 6:13,16, and 19. Of utmost importance is whether or not you are asking God to constantly guide you to love others and to accomplish His will in your life. This is not a one-time occurrence. You receive Christ as Savior once and for all, but when it comes to living by the Spirit, that is something you do daily. It is important to begin each day by asking God's guidance, and sometimes to renew your request during the day by asking the Spirit to fill you and to control you. That is step one.

Step two is to put the right things into your mind so that the Holy Spirit will transform you. If you put the wrong things in your mind, the Holy Spirit won't transform you. **And the key ingredient for the renewing of the mind is the Word of God**, the Bible. Do you want to become all that God meant for you to be? You can't do it without knowing your Bible and those things within it that tell you what to put in your mind. If you want to study God's Word and put His thoughts in your mind, you will become more like Him. If you want to fill your mind with reality TV, late night talk shows, trashy music, chasing after money, fame, and other things this world values, then you will become like the fools that promote such things.

So first our mind is renewed by the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Then we are able to understand and desire the will of God. And then we are increasingly and amazingly transformed by it. One little Bible verse sums it up so perfectly.

**Colossians 3:16:**

*16 Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use His words to teach and counsel each other. Sing*

*psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.*

Now that we're again grounded in the first two verses of this chapter, let's continue in Romans 12:3-5:

*3 As God's messenger, I give each of you THIS WARNING: **Be honest in your estimate of yourselves**, measuring your value by how much faith God has given you.*

*4 Just as **our bodies have many parts** and each part has a special function,*

*5 so it is with Christ's body. **We are all parts of his one body**, and each of us has different work to do. And **since we are all one body in Christ**, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others.*

The connection between Paul's appeal for believers to offer their **minds** and **bodies** to God in verses one and two, and the specific instructions he gives for doing so beginning in verse 3, are guidelines for how we should be conducting ourselves within the circle of believers in which we serve. Most often such a circle of believers is called a CHURCH. Here Paul begins to get specific about this renewed mind he just spoke of and to the things which this renewed mind should be open to receive. I like to illustrate this by suggesting that you think about your mind having a protective filter, which is the Holy Spirit. When you have bathed yourself in the Word of God in the Bible and know the will of God, all information that comes at you will have to pass through the filter of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will therefore filter out all the impurities that come at you, all the deception that Satan throws at you to try and get you back in his camp. If you are constantly letting the Holy Spirit know you want His help to protect you, He will not allow any of the pollutants to get in and do damage.

In these verses Paul instructs us to carefully and continually evaluate ourselves, our identity, and our gifts. We need to know who we are and have an accurate picture of how we may best serve Christ. We need also remember that a renewed mind is a mind similar in humility to the mind of Christ. And humility doesn't mean that one becomes a shrinking violet or a Casper Milquetoast.

Being **HUMBLE** is to have an accurate picture of who you are, what your capabilities are, knowing how to use those capabilities, and trusting in God to help you use them in His service. This allows you to be neither timid nor arrogant, but simply comfortable with who you are in Christ. Just imagine being able to be totally comfortable with who you are. Most people aren't you know.

When you became a Christian, God gave you something called a "*spiritual gift.*" He gave you at least one, and maybe more. We will look more closely at the various individual gifts next week. These spiritual gifts are really gifts to the Church to help it function as God intended. God gave a variety of gifts so that the Body of believers would have all the parts it needs to function fully.

And no one is to consider themselves better than another because of what their gifts might be. God may have given one the gift of preaching and another the gift of encouragement. Both are equal in value and both are necessary to the body of Christ. There's no room for a hierarchal structure in the Church established by Jesus. And there's no reason for anyone to think that they are either superior or inferior to another.

In verse 3 Paul tells them to be honest in the way they see themselves. In other words, when you think about yourselves make sure you avoid two serious mistakes. Number one, don't think too highly of yourself, and number two, don't think too little of yourself. But develop an attitude of who you are based on sound thinking. How do we do that? Paul tells us that **first we do it by our faith and secondly through our gifts.**

Now how can a person rightly recognize their gift? Verse three tells us that you recognize your gift according to the **measure of faith** God has given you. Whatever gift you have was given to you by God. That should tell you right from the get go how important it is to give your life totally to God. He has created you for a certain purpose and given you a talent in order to advance His kingdom. You need to know what it is and use it. If you ever want to see the maximum potential of that gift, if you ever want to see all that God can do with that gift, then you start by **giving your whole self to Him.** Then you'll see what will happen with that gift. God will maximize it and you will be blessed and fulfilled because you are doing what you were meant to do.

Therefore, if you don't use your gift in service to God, you cannot be fulfilled as a person.

Now let's get back to this "*measure of faith.*" **This "Measure of faith" is basically the kind and amount of faith it takes to use our gift.** For example, if I have the gift of preaching and teaching, then God gives me the faith it takes to use that gift. The **faith measured out to me** is the measure of faith to operate the gift God has given to me. He didn't give you and me a gift without the ability to use the gift. If someone has the gift of hospitality, they need God's help to maximize the gift. If someone has the gift of mercy, they need the God-given insight to hear a hurting person and see beyond the words into the pain in the heart. That's the faith that goes along with the gift.

So Paul tells believers to have a proper understanding of their gift and the knowledge that God is always available to help them use it. Then when you have a proper understanding of your gift and you know what it is that God has gifted you to do and you know He's given you the faith to do it, then you can be humble about it because you know it isn't you doing all these things, it's God. "Well," you might be saying to yourself, "*Are they ever going to tell us how we find out what our gift is?*" The answer is yes. Here are twelve things you need to do:

1. Present yourself a living sacrifice.
2. Know that you're gifted. But also know there may be a difference between your natural abilities and your spiritual gifts. God may bless your natural

abilities and use them, say as a chemistry teacher, but your spiritual gift in the church may be mercy. Your spiritual gift may be something apart from your skills and natural talents, or then again it might be related to those natural skills. What we're trying to say is to be open to whatever God may want to show you for service in His Church.

3. Pray for wisdom.
4. Seek nothing—that is don't have a predetermined idea of what your gift should be and don't try to force the "evidence" to fit that idea. This further confirms what we said in number 2.
5. Examine your heart's desires. What do you like to do?
6. Try various forms of ministry. Get involved in what God is doing in the Church.
7. Then notice what happens. Are people blessed as a result of your ministry? Do others say they see you functioning in a certain ministry or as possessing a certain quality, such as giving or helping or teaching?
8. Notice your own heart's response. Do you feel, "Aha! This is it!" Do you feel fulfilled? Do you sense the supernatural power of God enabling you to use the gift, or to function in that ministry?
9. Seek confirmation. Don't force the issue. If several spiritual people tell you something isn't your gift, believe them. If they tell you something is your gift, believe them. Because your spiritual gift is a gift to the Body or the Church, then the Church Body is often best equipped to identify it. That is, if they are prayerfully seeking spiritually gifted people and not just looking for a warm body to do a job.
10. Look for the blessing of God. That will be His way of indicating that you are using the spiritual gift He gave you.
11. Serve with your whole heart. You'll never know your gift if you're not willing to serve God with all your energy and enthusiasm.
12. When you have discovered what your gift is, go for it. Cultivate the gift and use it.

Some people feel uncertain about beginning this search for their spiritual gift. Some make the mistake of just jumping into whatever ministry opportunity comes along and soon learn they are not gifted for that ministry. If you might be one of those people, surveys have been developed to help identify spiritual gifts. You might want to start by filling out a survey and we have one available for you to use, if you wish.

When you've done all these things you may still possibly feel uncertain about your gift, but you will have a general idea of what it is you do well. So go for it and if you see that it's working well, you'll know in your heart that it's right. But remember, don't try to fool yourself into believing that you have a gift that you simply want to have for one reason or another. Make sure you follow all of the above steps, especially number six.

Now let's go on to talk about how Jesus intended His Church to function. In Colossians 1:18, we read:

*18 Christ is the **head of the church**, which is **his body**.*

This simply means that the Church is composed of a head, which is Jesus, and a body which is made up of all believers. Paul elaborates on this thought as He continues in Romans 12:4, 5 (NRSV):

*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.*

Paul is comparing our physical bodies to the body of Christ, the Church. Our physical bodies have many members. In other words, we have eyes, a nose, a mouth, ears, arms, legs, bones, cells, DNA, and so forth. Here Paul gives us this wonderful analogy of the body in order to help us see the relationship among believers in the church. We are one body and yet we are made up of many members who all work together to make the body function as it was designed by God to function. You know without my ever thinking about it my hands will do instantaneously what my mind tells them to do. Isn't it amazing how all the parts of our physical body work together? In verse 5 Paul says we're all connected and working together in a spiritual body just as all the members of a human body are connected to work together. We share a common life, common ministry, common gifts, common resources, common joy, common sorrow, common everything. That emphasizes our unity. We're all one, yet we're all different. And as one body each of the members depends on one another.

If in your physical body you had one part, like the eyes or liver that said, "*I'm not going to function. I'm not going to do what I'm supposed to do. I'm going to do what I want to do,*" you would have a big problem, wouldn't you? That's what Paul is saying. Everything in our physical body has to work together, just as everyone in the church has to work together if we want the whole body to work to its maximum design capability. If you have parts of the church that aren't functioning, if you have people in the church that aren't using the spiritual gifts they've been given, the whole body, the whole church suffers. If there are people in the church who are holding grudges or refusing to work alongside another church member, this hampers the use of their spiritual gifts and it puts a large barrier in the path of the church's ministry. Paul speaks to this issue again in Colossians 3:13-16:

*13 You must make allowance for each other's faults and **forgive the person who offends you**. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.*

*14 And **THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECE OF CLOTHING YOU MUST WEAR IS LOVE**. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony.*

*15 And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body **you are all called to live in peace**. And **ALWAYS BE THANKFUL**.*

*16 Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and*

*make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other.*

What a passage! God has made it possible for you to live in joy and harmony with one another if you just follow a few simple instructions. Just think about it. God gave you a special gift if you're a believer. You have therefore been commissioned to use your gift in His Church, the body of Christ. If you don't use that gift in serving the church, you are crippling the body so that it will not function as well as it should. If one of our body parts doesn't function, we don't have a backup to do what it does. The function is therefore lost. If your hand is paralyzed it will impair your ability to function. If your other hand becomes paralyzed it will more seriously affect your ability to function. The more parts that don't function as designed, the more seriously impaired the body will be. The only part of the body that could be paralyzed in some people and it might actually improve their function would be the tongue.

There is a book written by Paul Brand entitled, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*. Paul Brand is a well known surgeon in the South. He writes some fascinating things comparing the human body with the body of Christ. In the following excerpt from his book, he describes the diversity of the body's cells:

*"I'm first struck by their variety. Chemically my cells are almost all alike, but visually and functionally they are as different as animals in a zoo. Red blood cells, discs resembling life-saver candies, voyage through my blood loaded with oxygen to feed the other cells. Cartilage cells with shiny black nuclei look like bunches of black-eyed peas glued together for strength. **Fat cells** seem lazy and leaden like bulging white plastic garbage bags jammed together.*

*In contrast, skin cells form undulating patterns of softness and texture that rise and dip giving shape and beauty to our bodies. They curve and jut at unpredictable angles so that every person's fingerprint, not to mention his or her face, is **unique**.*

*Every second my smooth muscle cells modulate the width of my blood vessels, gently push matter through my intestines, open and close the plumbing in my kidneys. When things are going well my heart is contracting rhythmically, my brain is humming with knowledge, and I barely give these cells in my body a passing thought.*

*But I believe these cells in my body can also teach me about larger organisms such as families, groups, communities, villages, nations, and especially about one specific community of people that is likened to a body more than thirty times in the New Testament. I speak of the **body of Christ. The body of Christ, His Church**, like our own bodies, is composed of individual un-like cells that are knit together to form one body.*

*"What makes all the cells of our physical body work together? What ushers in the highly specialized functions of movement, sight, and consciousness through the coordination of a **HUNDRED TRILLION CELLS**? The secret to membership lies*

*locked away inside each cell nucleus, chemically coiled in a strand of DNA. Once the egg and sperm combine creating new life, the DNA chemical ladder splits down the center of every gene much as the teeth of a zipper pull apart. DNA reforms itself each time the cell divides, each having the identical DNA. DNA is estimated to contain instructions that if written out would fill a thousand, six-hundred page books (that's 600,000 pages).<sup>1</sup>*

***“If the DNA were unwound and joined together end to end, the strand could stretch from the earth to the sun and back more than 400 times. Every cell possesses a genetic code so complete that the entire body could be reassembled from information in any one of the body's cells.***

*“Just as the complete identity code of my body is found in each of its individual cells, so also the reality of God permeates every cell in His body, the Church, linking us members with a true organic bond. I share the fellowship of community in a universal body that includes every man and woman who believe in Jesus as their Savior.”*

Just as DNA resides in every cell in your body, so the living God who is the instruction manual for all truth resides in every cell within His Church, that is, with each individual person. Verse 5 tells us we're all different, we have differing gifts, but we have the common spiritual DNA through the presence of the living God.

Now listen carefully because you should find what follows fascinating. Again I'm reading from the book by Paul Brand:

*“In our figure conscious western world the word “fat” portrays a person with a lack of self-discipline who possesses an unnecessary collection of cells that should be reduced. There is, however, some value to fat. When the body needs it the fat cell releases it. Each fat cell is a storehouse containing a yellow globule of oil. Most of the time the cell lies dormant while the body eats enough food to fuel its need. If an overweight person with plenty of fat cells stops eating, they will be able to survive over a certain period of time while a thin person would starve. That is the most important function of fat.*

*“Sometimes a dreaded thing occurs in the body. A mutiny results in a tumor lipoma. A lipoma is a low grade benign tumor. It derives from a single fat cell that is lounging around storing fat and waiting to be called into service. The cell for some reason rebels against the leadership of the body and refuses to give up its reserves. It accepts deposits but ignores the withdrawal slips. As the cell multiplies, daughter cells follow its lead and the tumor grows like a fungus filling in crevices, pressing against muscles and organs and occasionally surgery is required.*

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<sup>1</sup> Parentheses added.

*“The cells function beautifully except for one flaw. They’ve become disloyal. In their activities they disregard the body’s needs. A tumor is called benign if its effect is fairly localized and it stays within membrane boundaries. But the most traumatizing condition occurs within the body when disloyal cells defy inhibition and multiply without any checks on growth, spreading rapidly throughout the body choking out normal cells. The body’s white cells armed against foreign invaders will not attack the body’s own mutinous cells. Physicians fear no other malfunction more deeply. This condition is called cancer and when out of control death results.”*

The illustration Brand makes is a powerful one. There are rebellious cells in the body of Christ, the Church, as well. Some of them are benign in the ultimate sense that they don’t seem to be killing the Church. They just gorge themselves by continuing to take in and take in and take in, and never give out so that the Church becomes ineffective and can’t function because all such people simply want is to get fatter and fatter. Their whole approach to things is “*What are you going to do for me?*” They’re the people that come on Sunday to hear a sermon but don’t want to get involved in the work of the church in areas such as outreach, tithing, community service, Bible studies, hospital visitation, care for the elderly, and any number of other church functions. They like to come and be fed, but they don’t want to help feed others. They’re also the ones that gossip and criticize.

Then there are those cells that are mutinous to the point where they literally kill the church because they rebel against it. The church is always in danger of both kinds: the lazy fat cells that basically starve the church of its usefulness, power, and resources. Then there are the evil cancerous cells that eat at its very life. The people who pressure the pastor to modify the truth of the Bible in his/her messages to attract more people. The people who don’t read their Bibles yet counsel others on what they think the will of God is. And then there are those who flat out simply want the church to be a social club.

We don’t want to be either, do we? We want to be the living, healthy cells that function for the glory of God and the health of the body of Christ. In **Ephesians 2:13-22**, Paul speaks to how Christ came to break down the barrier, the wall of hostility that separates all people. Jesus’ purpose was to create one unified body from the many warring factions that existed, thus making peace. He offered the world an opportunity to come together into one unified body with Himself as the head of that body.

In chapter four of Ephesians, Paul continues this emphasis on *oneness in verses 1-6*:

- 1 Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you **have been called by God**.*
- 2 Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults **because of your love**.*
- 3 Always keep yourselves **united in the Holy Spirit**, and bind yourselves together with peace.*
- 4 **We are all one body**, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future.*

*5 There is only **one Lord, one faith, one baptism,**  
6 and there is only one God and Father, **who is over us all and in us all**  
and living through us all.*

If you look around at the various churches in our community and you don't see this attitude being practiced, it's simply because those churches don't place an emphasis on teaching the Word of God in the Bible, or they don't understand the Word of God in the Bible, or they don't care about the Word of God in the Bible. If any or all of these attitudes exist within a church, that church or those churches are preventing the universal Church of Jesus Christ from doing what it was meant to do. And the reason for this is that certain members of the universal body of Christ, that includes all churches everywhere, are refusing to do what they've been called to do by the head of the Church, Jesus Christ. Such churches and such people will be judged with severity. And the pastors, elders, and leaders of these churches will be punished more severely for failing to live up to the responsibility they accepted in leading God's flock (2 Peter 2:1).

Now you know God's purpose and detailed plan for His Church. Don't, therefore, ever accept anything less in the church you attend or belong to. Don't accept anything less from the pastor or pastors. If they're not teaching and living this type of doctrine, they must be called to accountability by the rest of the body. If they do not correct such leadership, they should be removed. This church, Village Church, is committed to living within the will of God and functioning as a church according to His commands. We extend an open invitation to each of you to approach us if you ever sense any deviation in our teaching or behavior from the Word of God as revealed to us through His Word here today. Let's now share in a time of fellowship over coffee, and offer our love to one another as members of the body of Christ. And let's continue to pray for one another and our church each and every day. Contacting one another sometime during the week would be a good idea as well.