**Ministering Community**

**Romans 12:3-8 (ESV)**

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Today we’re going to be opening up our Bibles to Romans chapter 12. We’re in a new series. It’s a series entitled *Community in Action: I’m In!* Then the subtitle is Following Jesus Doesn’t Happen Alone. It’s a series where we’re emphasizing the community of the church. Today I have this t-shirt on to emphasize one of the ways that we believe at Bethany it is important for us to grow community within our own local church family. We believe it’s through Community Groups. You see sign-up tables out there. We really want you to consider becoming part of a Community Group.

Romans chapter 12 begins the practical section of this letter. The first eleven chapters are really heavy doctrine and truth about the Gospel. Now he says this is how we live it out.

***1*** *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, 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 renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

***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.* ***4*** *For as in one body we have many members and the members do not all have the same function,* ***5*** *so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.* ***6*** *Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;* ***7*** *if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching;* ***8*** *the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.* ***9*** *Let love be genuine.*

What is Bethany’s vision? In short, our church exists to glorify God by following Jesus together. We desire for everything we do as a church family to connect to this one very simple truth. We follow Jesus in His teaching. We don’t create the curriculum. We listen to what Jesus teaches and then we say that’s what we want to teach as a church. We follow Jesus in our worship. We worship the one true God, the God who is triune, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that Jesus reveals in all grace and all truth. We follow Jesus in our fellowship. We want to relate to one another the way Jesus tells us to relate to one another. We don’t make up our own rules. We follow Jesus in our mission. We say, “What are we to be about as a church?” Then we listen to what Jesus tells us we are to be about, not what the world tells us we are to be about. We follow Jesus in our relationships. We follow Jesus in our governance. We follow Jesus in our values, those things which we see as most important.

Now, there are many different ways that Christ-honoring churches communicate this vision, but no true church creates their own vision. The vision of every true church is from Jesus. Jesus is the One who calls us to follow Him and He calls us to follow Him in community with other brothers and sisters who are brought into God’s family.One of the places where we receive the language that we use to describe this vision is John 10. In speaking about the church, Jesus says,

**John 10:14-16** I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold.

He’s talking about Gentiles. Now He’s talking about us.

**John 10:16** …I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

**John 10:3** The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

He knows us personally, by name. Every one of us!

**John 10:4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

That’s what sheep do when they are in this one flock, the flock of the Good Shepherd. They listen and then they act upon their listening. They follow Him. We are one flock because we are Jesus’ sheep. As Jesus’ flock, we listen to His voice and we obey Him. The motto that we adopted to communicate this most basic vision is printed on this t-shirt. It’s simply Following Jesus Together. In the future, we may use different wording to describe this vision, but if we endure as a true church, this vision will also endure because it’s what Jesus tells us we are to be about.

What exactly is involved in following Jesus together? As we have thought about a path to describe very simply in a way that we can kind of grab onto it, we thought of three words**:** Believe, Belong, Become. These three words are printed almost every week in the bulletin that you receive. This path of Believe, Belong, Become, is a path that every person who follows Jesus is participating in. It is the means by which we follow Him together.

First is Believe. We listen to Jesus say

**John 14:6** … “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

We hear Jesus say

**John 11:25-26** … “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Followers of Jesus say, “Yes, I believe. I believe you are the Messiah. I believe you are King. I believe you are Savior. I believe you are Lord.” I want to ask you as Jesus calls you and He calls everyone to believe, have you believed in Jesus? Have you received Him as your Shepherd, as your Savior? Jesus says

**John 5:24** Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Then the next step along the path of following Jesus is Belong. Jesus calls us to make our association true through belief, but then as we come to Him, we also become in relationship with other sheep in His one flock. Jesus calls us then to commit our lives to loving one another as His sheep, as His disciples. In fact, Jesus says

**John 13:35** By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

So He wants this belonging together to be an important aspect of what it means to follow Him. No one follows Him individually and separately from the rest of the flock. We are one flock and we have one Shepherd and we follow Him together

Then finally, Become. In following Jesus, He says He transforms us so that we become more and more like Him. Theologians call this process progressive sanctification. That simply means we become like Jesus more and more in our obedience, in our behaviors, in our relationships. We become more like Him in our mission, why we’re here, what enthuses us, what we invest our lives in. We become more like Him in our words. The big idea is that we become a kind of people that we formerly were not prior to following Jesus.

**Mark 1:17** And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”

We open up our Bibles this morning to Romans 12 where we have begun a series entitled *Community in Action.* The main idea that we’re going to glean from verses 3-8 this morning is that when we follow Jesus, we will invest ourselves in making our own local church stronger. This becomes the active application that Paul makes from the first two verses. These two verses call us to a life of radical worship.In these verses, God first makes an earnest appeal to the members of His church.

**An Earnest Appeal: Strengthen the local church where you worship.**

The local church matters to God and in following Jesus, one of the places where Jesus leads us right to is to His local church in active participation, in helpfulness to strengthen that body for the glory of God. In Romans chapters 1-11, the Apostle Paul has been laying before us a foundation of doctrine that leads to worship. In those first eleven chapters, we’ve learned truths about God that He is righteous and holy and powerful and majestic. We learned truths about sin, that it’s dark and rebellious. We learn about the nature of man. There is not one of us who does good, no, not even one. We learn about the justice and righteousness of God, but we also learn of His grace and His mercy. He offers to us redemption in the cross of Jesus. We learn about justification through faith, that we can be declared righteous on the basis of Jesus’ work. We learn about sanctification through the Holy Spirit. We actually can become more and more like Jesus. We learn about the faithfulness of God to love His very own all the way to the end of life and on into eternity. Nothing separates us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. We learn about God’s kingdom plan in reference to Israel and the church. Now in chapter 12, Paul turns to the specific life application. After all of this doctrine, he says, now let me talk about how this doctrine matters to real life. He puts shoe leather on the good news that he has explained in the first eleven chapters. This is the application that he makes.

***1*** *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God,*

Notice that this is an appeal. This is not an arm-twisting. This is an earnest appeal. You can hear his heart just almost pleading. I appeal to you my brothers. You’re brothers and sisters of this one flock, this one family that God has created. He appeals as a member of that family, now.

*by the mercies of God,*

In view of all that we’ve said of God’s grace, His lovingkindness, His patience, His mercy in Christ Jesus,

*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 renewal of your mind,*

These are two aspects of who we are. We’re physical and we’re also spiritual. We have a body and we have a soul. He says, “I want you to take your body and present it, your whole body to God. I want you to have your soul, your mind, your heart. I want you to have that conformed, that invisible part of you, conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.”

*that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

You don’t have to fear by following God’s will that you’re going to miss out in life. As you present your bodies to God in view of His mercy and as you have your mind conformed to the image of Christ Jesus and not conformed to this world, you’re going to discover something. You’re going to discover that God’s will is actually perfect. It’s pleasing and it’s really, really good. But what does it mean to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice? That still sounds sort of ethereal. It sounds sort of misty. What exactly do we do with our bodies in order to worship God with our bodies? That’s where Paul brings us to this place of a commitment to our own local church in service and love, in relationship and connection, in verses 3-21. What Paul is saying is that presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice means that we devote ourselves to building Jesus’ church, to building her fellowship, to building her mission, to strengthen the church where we worship.

You might say, “Well, I’m not sure if I’m following. How does that connect?” I just want you to observe what we observed last week. Paul takes this big broad general principle of devoting our bodies to God, not being conformed to the world, but having our mind renewed, and there are dozens and dozens and dozens of applications the Apostle Paul could have made on the basis of that spiritual ground of worship. But the application that he drives home is the application of our devotion to this new community that God creates in Christ, to this participation in this family by loving our brothers and sisters, through this focus on a family mission, a mission of which we’re members, but a mission which is Jesus’ and a mission that the family then connects to together for its fulfillment. I want you to just notice that in the verses that follow.

**Romans 12:4** For as in one body we have many members,

So your bodies are connected to this other spiritual body and there are many members of this body.

**Romans 12:4** …and the members do not all have the same function,

Each person in that body has a different sort of usefulness in strengthening the body.

**Romans 12:5** so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

There is a spiritual unity that we have with each other, just as the parts of a physical body have a unity with other parts.

**Romans 12:6** Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:

We first receive the grace of our salvation, of redemption in Christ, of adoption. But we also receive this grace of spiritual enablement to do the ministry of Jesus now in this world. Each one of us has been given these gifts. Each of these gifts within the members of the church are different from one person to another, but it’s all grace. So the Apostle Paul says let’s use them. As you present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice, one of the primary applications that Paul drives home is let’s use these gifts that have been given to us by having our bodies involved in the ministry of Jesus through His local church.

**Romans 12:9** Let love be genuine.

In other words, allow both your body and your mind to be connected to your brothers and sisters in a way that there is nothing superficial about that relationship. You allow the roots of love to sink deep into your hearts so that when you greet one another in your own local church, it’s more than, “Hey, I really care for you.” It’s real. It’s something deep. It’s something authentic. Let love be genuine.

**Romans 12:10** Love one another with brotherly affection.

There is this softness. There is this warmth described by these words “brotherly affection.” He says when you present your bodies to God in your own local church,

**Romans 12:10** …Outdo one another in showing honor.

What does that mean? It means that when we come together in community, we’re looking for ways for our brothers and sisters to be honored above ourselves. So rather than coming into community and saying, I hope my preferences are going to be honored today, we say, I really want my brothers and sisters preferences to be honored today. I want my body to do whatever it takes to see that other people are honored. He says that’s what it means to actually present your bodies to God. It’s to outdo one another in honor. He goes on to say

**Romans 12:11** …serve the Lord.

That’s a bodily commitment.

**Romans 12:12** Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation,

While we’re in community, there is going to be tribulation. We’re going to need to be patient with some things that just happen that are hard to walk through together. We’re going to have to be patient with some people who are failing. It hurts when they fail, so be patient in tribulation.

**Romans 12:12** …be constant in prayer.

It means taking your body and your mind and devoting time, devoting physical energy to praying for one another and being devoted to each other in prayer. Then he says

**Romans 12:13** Contribute to the needs of the saints

That’s a bodily function. I don’t know how we can contribute to the needs of the saints apart from our bodies being engaged. Present your bodies to God. What does that mean? It means we contribute to the needs of the saints. Some of those are physical needs. It might be financial needs of contributing a check to someone who is in need. It might be going over to someone’s house and fixing a door that is broken. It might be emotional. It might be taking our body and taking some time to write out a card and say, “I want you to know I’m praying for you. Here’s a verse that I hope encourages you because it encouraged me.” Contributing to the needs of the saints might be a spiritual need. It might be a relational need. How many needs are there in God’s new community? There are too many to list. So how are these needs going to be met? It’s when the body of Christ, members of the church, say, I’m presenting my body to God. God, how would you have me to contribute to the needs of the saints? That’s what it means to worship God with our bodies presented to Him as a living sacrifice. We do things with our body that is not self-focused. We do things with our body to build the body of Christ, to build the family of God.

**Romans 12:13** …and seek to show hospitality.

What does that mean? It means we take our body, the physical residence in which we live and the bodies which we have in that physical, and instead of creating a mote where we say, “This is my castle. This is my peaceful place. Everybody needs to stay out.” We say I’m going to invite people in. My body is going to labor to create an environment inside my own home where people know that they’re welcome to come in and where I can encourage, where I can build up, where I can demonstrate love through the place in which God has given me to live.

My son, Alexander, I love he and his wife’s example of this to me. He talks about having milk friends. Do you know what a milk friend is? A milk friend is someone who, when they come over to your house, they come in and they can open up the refrigerator, grab the milk out, pour a glass of milk and drink it without even having to ask. He says, “I want to have milk friends. I want to have people who we create such an environment of warmth and acceptance that it’s like you’re going into your own home when you come into our home. You don’t even have to ask if you can have a glass of milk. Just go in and take it.” I love that vision. It helps me to have a vision for my own home. It’s showing hospitality.

What Paul is doing is saying what does it mean to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God? It often means something other than what we think it means. It often means something so simple and yet so very profound, of doing something with our bodies that expresses love, something that expresses comfort, something that expresses encouragement, something that expresses community and our commitment to that community.

When Jesus makes a disciple, He calls us all by saying, “Follow me.” Again, I want to park here for just a moment. I know in a group this size, I think all of you may now because I’ve just said it, have heard Jesus call you saying, “Follow me.” That’s what Jesus says to every person. Follow me. The invitation is open to everyone. He doesn’t shut anyone out from the invitation. Y’all are part of this call when you hear Jesus say personally, “Follow me.” But I’m sure in a group this size, not all of you have said, “Yes, I’ve decided to follow Jesus.”

I want to ask you, have you decided to follow Jesus? I want to call you to think about the Shepherd who gives you this call. He loves you so much that He laid down His life for you. More than that, He did so effectively. In other words, He didn’t just die and then well, he is no longer. He rose again. He is Lord. He is King. He is the Lord of life. He is the one who actually actively can connect you to God. He can connect you to eternal life. He is the only one who can. So I would ask you, have you decided to follow Jesus? There is only one of two decisions that a person has when they hear Jesus say, “Follow me.” They either say, “Yes, I’m going to follow you,” or they say, “No.” They might say, “Not now,” but that’s a no. I want to ask you, have you decided to follow Jesus? That’s the first issue related to your life with God, related to really everything.

But if you have chosen to follow Jesus, do you know where He’s going to lead you? When you hear Jesus say, “Follow me,” do you know where He is going to lead you? Now, there are some parts of where Jesus will lead you that are so specific that we don’t know yet. It’s step by step following. There are other parts though, where we can say, on the basis of Scripture, yes, I know where Jesus is going to lead you. Do you know where Jesus is going to lead you? Here is where I know He is going to lead you. If you’re following Jesus, He is going to lead you straight into the depths of this new community He calls His family, His church. That’s where He is going to lead you.

There is no person who follows Jesus that finds that Jesus doesn’t lead them to that place, to a deep devoted commitment to their own local church. There is not one! Jesus is about the work of building His church. He says, I have sheep, but there is one flock. I’m placing my one flock to be related to one another, to do ministry together, to fulfill my mission, to encourage each other, to help one another. That’s my whole design. So I know that when Jesus calls me to follow Him, He is going to call me right into the midst of a people whom He has created for His own glory, out of His own pleasure. It’s a people whom He now calls His family that relates to one another as brothers and sisters.

Jesus gives us a mission to accomplish together. He calls us to invest our lives in His fellowship of His family and in the ministry that He carried out while He was here and that He now carries out through His body, the church. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, this is what Jesus said to us as disciples, as people who are part of this one flock, part of His church.

**Matthew 28:18-19** And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

In other words, help other people hear my call to follow me and then when they answer yes to that call, help them to follow me all through their life. Make disciples of all nations. How do you do that?

**Matthew 28:19** …baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

In other words, we’re teaching the Gospel in a way that people then will believe in Jesus and when they believe, they’ll be baptized. That means that they are identifying with Jesus, but they also through baptism, are identifying with God’s family. They’re saying, “I’m part of something bigger than myself, now. I’m part of the family of God.” That’s what baptism symbolizes. Then He says

**Matthew 28:20** teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

We teach all the way until the end of a person’s life. Jesus says

**Matthew 28:20** And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

I love the fact that God has chosen weak things to confound the strong and foolish things to confound the wise. I love that! There are a lot of other designs I might have if I’m trying to fulfill a mission and I had unlimited resources in which to fulfill it. But God chose not angels to fulfill the mission of Jesus after Jesus left. He chose the church. It’s a church filled with people who, if you look around, you’ll say we’re not that impressive. Amen? (Amen!) We’re just sort of ordinary. We have knees that almost squeak when you walk. We have some failings. We have weaknesses emotionally and relationally. We don’t have everything all together all the time. We’re not that kind of people. He could have chosen angels, who have an unlimited supply of first, physical energy. He could have chosen angels who have never sinned and never will sin. He could have chosen them, but He didn’t. He chooses redeemed people. Why is that? It’s because God is most glorified by using weak things because then He reveals Himself to be so amazingly strong. Amen? That’s who we are. This is God’s plan.

So I want to ask you, I appeal to you, again this is an appeal. I don’t want to motivate you to love God’s church and become committed and active in this new community and her mission and her fellowship, through shame or guilt. I don’t want to twist any arms. I want to reflect what Paul is saying.

***1*** *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God,*

You have a Shepherd who died in your place. You have a Shepherd who gives you these spiritual gifts and invests in you so that you can have a life filled with meaning and know God’s will. I know as a shepherd that if you live out God’s will, you’re going to prove that God’s will is good and pleasing and perfect and that you’re not going to miss out on life. The opposite is true.

So here’s the application. Ask God what your part is to strengthen your church family. Some of you may come from outside of this church and you’re going to go home to your church family. I encourage you to take this application and ask God what your part is to strengthen your church family. If you’re part of Bethany, ask God what your part is to strengthen Bethany. Do not ask if you have a part to strengthen God’s family. I already know that’s true. On the basis of the Word of God, yes, each one of us has a very meaningful and powerful part. What part do I have to the strengthening of God’s family?

Someone might say, “Where do I begin?” I’m going to give a couple specifics not because these specifics are more important than any other specific, but just sort of as a way to become more specific in your thinking of this application. First, if you’re a part of Bethany, we’ve asked the question, how can we create more connection among brothers and sisters? We as a church family come from a wide geographical range. Some of you live 80 or 90 miles apart from each other. How can we be one flock when you’re living 80 or 90 miles apart from some others in the family? We ask everyone who is at Bethany to come on Sunday morning. Let’s worship together. We think it’s meaningful. We think it’s powerful. We think it’s unifying. We think it’s glorifying to God.

The second commitment that we would ask everyone to be part of is a part of a Community Group. We don’t really have a way to make a big church small except through this. This is a primary means. If I’m presenting my body to God as a living sacrifice and I know that means I’m investing myself to strengthen the local church, what we would ask you to consider is would that mean for you to be committed to a Community Group?

Now again, we don’t look with that as this is the law of God if you say “No, I don’t think so.” No one is going to think ill of you. But as church leaders, we’re asking the question because we think this is the best way. I think it’s going to be meaningful for us to be able to have the kind of community God would have us to have. If you present your bodies to God by placing your body in a Community Group week after week, or some meet twice a month, you actually will strengthen this church. You’re going to be there and you’re going to encourage your brothers and sisters by your presence, by your words, by your prayers. We think that’s what will happen.

The second application that is specific is to commit yourself to ministering the Gospel through some ministry of the local church. The local church is invested with God in the mission to make disciples. A lot of that takes place here at this location. Some of the discipleship takes place outside the walls of this particular space. But look at the ways that the church family is ministering and say, how can I minister the Gospel through some of the ministries that are already happening, where I’m working alongside other gifted brothers and sisters?

So for instance, last week, Pastor Daniel, who oversees our children’s ministry, shared about Children’s Church. What an amazing ministry! I’m so thankful to be part of a church that has such a strong ministry of discipleship to children. We have Sunday School, Children’s Church, VBS, AWANA. There are so many ways that we have an opportunity to impact these kids for Christ. But last week, Pastor Daniel shared that we’re going to have to cut back on our ministry to children in Children’s Church so that we won’t have 3rd-5th grade Children’s Church. Again, does God still use this church to make disciples for children in 3rd-5th grade? Yes. Absolutely! Do we think that is an opportunity that we have lost? Yes, we think there is some loss of opportunity there to make disciples. But we don’t have enough gifted workers who are saying, “I want to be part of that.” Again, I appeal to you not on the basis of shame or guilt. I’m not saying you must do it or else you’re a bad person. But won’t you pray and say, how can I be involved? There are hundreds of ways that we might actively be involved with our brothers and sisters to make disciples for Christ. I make an earnest appeal.

**A Change of Mind: Think more about the family and less about self.**

***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,*

In other words, think with discernment. Think with alignment with the teaching of God about the Gospel and about this new community.

*each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

The word “think” is used three times in this verse. So we are encouraged to take some time and meditate upon what is important to God in life and then make commitments of our body and of our mind, of our spiritual gifts, we’ll see in a moment, based on what’s important to God. The clear and present danger for us is to grab hold of the thinking of this world and live sort of a Christian life while still conforming in our basic thoughts to the pattern of this world. How different Jesus thinks from the way the world thinks! So, how a follower of Jesus thinks about all of life is different from a person who is being conformed to this world. Jesus thinks about life, about family, about church, about work, about everything from a totally different basis. He thinks from a God-centered basis.

On the other hand, what defines the way this world thinks? It is conformity to self. The world thinks about everything from the standpoint of self as the center. It’s possible for us to think about Jesus’ church with a self-centered, worldly mindset. The worldly mindset reflects on the church with self at the center instead of Jesus at the center. The worldly mindset that thinks about the church from the self standpoint of thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, as Paul says, easily becomes disconnected, disappointed, or even disgusted with the church. The worldly mindset looks at some of the failings of the church, some of the difficulties, some of the conflicts, some of the hard matters of a church life, and they become disconnected, disappointed and even disgusted. That’s because we’re thinking of the church from a self-focused mind.

On the other hand, Jesus’ mind leans into a failing and frail and feeble church and presents grace. He presents life. He presents hope. Christ-centeredness sees the weakness of the church. We’re not immune to seeing the weakness. It just says a Christ-centeredness is not primarily a critic. A Christ-centered mind is primarily an offer of compassion, an offer of assistance, an offer of help.

In verse 3, God says in view of the Gospel think about your life as a redeemed child of God and as part of this family. You’re not outside the family, but you’re part of the family that God has created. You have been joined to Christ. You have been joined to this new community in an internal, deep, significant way. You’ve been connected to the mission that God has given to His family. Think about life with a view to who God created you to be in Jesus Christ and what you believe God calls you to do. Paul makes this specific application now to Christian ministry.

***4*** *For as in one body we have many members and the members do not all have the same function,* ***5*** *so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.*

Again, a Christ-centered mindset says this is now what my new identity is. I cannot disconnect from that because this is who I am in Christ. This is what Christ is all about. He is about creating and building this church for His glory and for His name. For all the difficulties, this is what He is doing. Paul is highlighting a specific danger in our thinking about life to naturally begin to think about ourselves more than the family who Jesus loves, the family that Jesus is building for His glory.

It’s so easy to be conformed to this world because it’s the most natural thing of all to think about self. We naturally think more often about the things that are passing away than we naturally think about things that are eternal. We naturally think more about our own lives than we think about God or about His new community. That’s natural to all of us. So that’s where Paul says, I appeal to you on the basis of God’s mercy, don’t be conformed. Don’t let the world squeeze you into a self-centered way of thinking about life. Keep Christ at the center of everything.

How does self-centered thinking endanger the believer’s relationship to Jesus and to His new community? Well, I thought of five ways. Just jot them down for you to think about at some point in the future. Each of these are so filled with potential to consider their impact upon our lives. First, self-centered thinking tempts us to become an outsider critic of the church rather than an insider change agent. This happens when we start talking about the church as “they” and “them” versus “me” and “us.” So whenever we start thinking about “They should be doing that,” guess what? We’ve flipped the script and become worldly in our thinking. We become self-focused. The Christ-focused mindset says I’m a member of this body. This is we. This is our family together.

Self-centered thinking tempts us to disengage from the church when we are personally disappointed with our experiences with her. Self-centered thinking tempts us to engage with the ministry of the church for self-promoting reasons rather than for Christ-exalting ones. Self-centered thinking tempts us to engage with the ministry of the church in our own abilities, in our own power, rather than in dependence upon the Holy Spirit through prayer. Self-centered thinking tempts us to be more devoted to the kingdom of this world than we are to the kingdom of God. In other words, our bodies and our minds are invested more in things that are passing away rather than in things that are eternal. Verse 3 says

*think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

I love that! Circle that word “faith” because it’s so important about our thinking regarding the church. He’s talking about the church.

*think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

What does faith have to do with our thinking about the church? Well, Paul says that we walk by faith and not by sight. The things that we can see are temporary. The things that are unseen are eternal. This thing of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdom of the world, we can see the kingdom of the world. It’s around us and we can see evidence all over the place. But the kingdom of God requires faith to see that God is actually actively working in and through this world and doing something amazing and bringing all of history to this ultimate future end. So He says

*each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

The stronger our faith, the more we’ll see how precious Jesus’ church is. We’ll see how precious Jesus is and how we can engage with our worship of God in Christ. So here’s the application. Take some time this week to think. Think with faith. Think about God. Think about His calling upon your life. Think about His church. Think about how precious the church is to Jesus. Think about the church where God has placed you. Ask, “How might I strengthen my own church in her worship, in her love, in her fellowship, in her ministry of discipleship, in her witness to the world?” Ask the question, “Am I presenting my body to God so that He does what He wants with me versus me doing what I want with me?” Paul says don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.

So we have an earnest appeal. Strengthen the local church where God has placed you. We have a change of mind. Think more about the family and less about self. Finally, we have

**A Reasonable Commitment: Use your gifts to grow the strength of your local church.**

***6*** *Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;* ***7*** *if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching;* ***8*** *the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.*

The idea is that God gives every member of His church a spiritually-focused capacity to accomplish and fulfill the ministry which He has given to His church. Jesus loves the church! In fact, in Ephesians 5, He says

**Ephesians 5:25** Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

The love of Jesus upon His church is a permanent kind of love. He says I’m going to give every member a special gift to be used so that this Bride of mine is being perfected.

**Ephesians 5:26-27** that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Every member is given gifts to participate in Jesus’ work of purifying His bride, of making His bride more complete in love, complete in righteousness, complete in purposeful ministry unto the Lord, complete in proclamation of the Gospel, complete in worship. Every member has a spiritually focused capacity to strengthen the church. So he says let’s use the gifts. I appeal to you as a member of Jesus’ church, Paul says, you have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of strengthening the church. Use them!

I don’t know if you’re like me, but have you ever purchased something that you thought this is going to make my life so much easier? This is going to be really important for me. You purchase it, but then you never really open the package and use it. I was down in my basement the other day and there is this really cool paint applicator that I bought about six years ago when we were going to do some paint project, and it’s still in the plastic. I never got it out of the plastic. I purchased it. I’m sure it cost a little bit of money to do that, and it’s just sitting there. If anybody needs a paint applicator, come and see me afterwards because it should be used. It was designed for a purpose. I purchased it for a purpose, but then it just stayed in its box.

God has granted each one of you specific gifts, capacities to use to the strengthening of His church for His glory as His mission, as He is bringing the story all the way to the end. One day, it’s going to be complete. As you look at the gifts, ask yourself, are my gifts still in a box? I could look at that paint applicator and say it’s a nice paint applicator. I can observe it. I can compliment it. But if it’s not being used for its purpose, then why did I purchase it? It’s laying there without meaning, without fulfilling its intended design.

Again, I don’t want to appeal to you with shame or guilt. I want to appeal to you by the mercy of God. God has given every one of you a great gift for the purpose of connecting to your local church family in a way that causes the local church family to be more vibrant in faith. I make an appeal to you, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God’s mercies, on the basis of the interests of Jesus, devote your bodies to use your spiritual gifts in building your church family.

We give ourselves a lot of reasons for why we do not present our bodies to Jesus for His use in His own local church. I’m not immune to those. Jesus talks about that problem.

**Luke 9:57** As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

So this man heard Jesus say, “Follow me.” “I will do it. I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

**Luke 9:58** And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

He’s saying, wait a minute! Before you begin, I want to ask you, do you know what you’re committing yourself to? If you’re expecting it to be easy, you’re going to get very disappointed and you’re going to leave. That would be worse than you never starting. There are a lot of folks that say, “Okay, I’m in. I’m going to follow you.” They get involved in the church and it’s hard. “This person didn’t treat me right. It’s bad over here. I don’t think I’m going to do this anymore.” Jesus says to this person who says I’m going to follow you, wait a minute.

**Luke 9:58** And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Do you know that next week we don’t have a Holiday Inn Express that we’re staying in? Do you know we’re going to be laying out in some desert somewhere? Do you know the kind of hardships, the kind of rejection? Do you know how difficult this journey is going to be? Take some time. Then He says

**Luke 9:59** To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”

It seems like a reasonable request, doesn’t it?

**Luke 9:60** And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

Reading these words causes me to tremble. Let me just take care of this one this world thing. It’s important. Let me bury my dad. But Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” What is Jesus saying? He’s saying if this world’s temporal issues crowd out the eternal issues, you’re not able to follow me, even such a thing as a funeral for a dad. If you’re not willing to say the most important thing is the eternal and if the eternal gets in the way of the transitory, the transitory is going to be set aside. If you don’t get that, you can’t follow me.

**Luke 9:61** Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”

I just want to go back and say goodbye.

**Luke 9:62** Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Again, just reading those words from Jesus puts a lump of trepidation in my throat. It causes me to stop and think, and well it should. There are a lot of reasons we give for why this call to present our bodies to God and invest our lives in Jesus’ mission of strengthening His church is not really convenient right now for me. It all has to do with faith. It all has to do with listening to Jesus and following Him. Do I trust Him? By God’s mercy, He set His love upon us in such a way that you and I who are in Christ are called children of God. What kind of love, what immensity of love the Father has placed upon us that we, people who are sinful, people who deserve to be separated from God forever, that we should be called God’s children, and such we are. It’s amazing grace!