

Our focus today is how we can be a **community-building church**, which is 1 of our values here at Calvary Christian Reformed Church. And before we dive in I want to see what communities everyone lives in because I know we are scattered throughout the Twin Cities Metro. So I will say the name of a city or suburb and if you live there please stand up. Keep standing until I say the next city. I want everyone else to look around and see where everyone is from. My hope is that this will give us a better sense of what communities we can be building up.

Bloomington, Eden Prairie, Chanhassen, Chaska, Minnetonka, St. Louis Park, Golden Valley, Plymouth, Hopkins, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Shakopee, Burnsville, Newport, Inver Grove Heights, Eagan, Arizona, Florida. Did I miss any?

When we talk about being a community-building church, I want all of us to focus on both our home community - where we live, and our church community - where we worship, right here in Edina at 53rd and France, blocks away from the well known 50th and France shopping and dining center.

I think this component of ministry is VERY important. We learned about this a ton in seminary. Here is a picture of the **map** I have up in my office. I have a pin where everyone lives. I also have big pins for the other Christian Reformed Churches in the area and the Christian Schools where many of our Calvary kids attend. This is a helpful visual for me as I think how we can be a community-building church in the neighborhoods the Lord has providentially placed us in.

Today we will look at Romans 12 and how it guides us on being a community-building church. Romans 12:1-2 is loaded with what I call phenomenal phrases. Each little phrase is packed with so much truth, so much guidance, so much encouragement. Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, intentionally packed so much goodness in these 2 verses I don't want to miss anything so we will look at each phenomenal phrase 1 at a time.

Phenomenal Phrase #1 is “in view of God’s mercy.” What is God’s mercy? God’s mercy is what Paul has been writing about it in the first 11 chapters of Romans! Paul has been proclaiming the gospel of Jesus, the story of his life, death, and resurrection, and how we, as God’s people, are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone. Through these chapters, the Holy Spirit repeatedly points us to the cross. Paul encourages us to always keep the cross in view. That’s why we have a big cross up front. That’s why we have a cross in our Calvary logo. That’s why the name of our church is Calvary - which was the hill the cross stood upon. The Spirit wants us to always keep the story of the cross in our minds. The God-man, perfect, sinless, full of grace and truth, took the lash, took the thorns, took the nails for us. Jesus took the pain for us because he knows each of us by name and wanted to save us from eternal separation from God. Through Christ’s sacrifice, we have access to God. We can know him, love him, and serve him.

The book of Romans says more about God’s grace. And just a warning, the next few verses I’m going to read and not easy to comprehend. We are wading into the ocean of the mind of God. And just like the ocean, we can only go so deep before we get crushed or lost in the depth of God’s plan for his world and his people.

In Romans 9-11, Paul teaches us about the depth of God’s grace. I encourage everyone to read Romans 9-11 sometime this week. Read it slowly, carefully, and prayerfully. You will be blown away by the power of God’s grace. In chapter 9, Paul is teaching about how God chose Jacob but hated Esau. Some may think, “That’s not fair! Why didn’t Esau get a fair chance?” But we need to remember we are not God, we are tiny, frail, limited minded humans, and we can only see things from our perspective. God knows all and sees all and we need to trust that God knows what he is doing.

14 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! **15** For he says to Moses,

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." [f]

16 It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

The Scriptures teach us our faith and our salvation is a gift from God. It's like when parents give their child a Christmas present. The parents don't say, "Alright buddy, that'll be \$50." No, they give their child a present because they love their kid. They don't expect anything in return.

It's not about our effort, it's not even about our desire, it's all about God's mercy. We are dead in sins. Dead. Can't move. Can't think. Can't desire life. Christ died for us when we were sinners. We are alive in Christ because of God's choosing, not because of our choosing. We call this predestination or election. That should fill us with great comfort. Our forgiveness, our freedom from sin, is by the power of God. And when God promises something, it ALWAYS comes true.

When I graduated college and was looking at seminaries, this is a theological strength of the Christian Reformed Church. I firmly believe the CRC interprets Romans 9-11 and other passages about God's grace faithfully. We fully recognize our own sin and fully acknowledge the total dependency we have on God's grace.

My question for all of us is, "How will we keep God's mercies in view this week? How will we intentionally think about all the mercies God has shown us?"

Phenomenal Phrase #2 is "Living sacrifice." I hope we can appreciate the 2000 year ancient tradition of offering animal sacrifices in this statement. For 2000 years, God's people saw sacrificing animals on the altar as a form of worship.

Generation after generation after generation offering sin offerings and thanksgiving offerings. God commanded them to do this to remind them of their sin, his forgiveness, and to be thankful for all of God's blessing. Killing animals on the altar seems very strange to us, it sounds like unnecessary animal cruelty. But animal sacrifices were very common in the ancient world. Everybody did it. Egyptians, Assyrians, Canaanites. Offerings showed loyalty to your king or your gods. The Ancient Israelites were unique in that they offered sacrifices to the 1 true God, to Yahweh, the Lord Almighty.

Romans teaches us that Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate and final sacrifice for sins. No more killing animals as sacrifice. Don't need it. The blood of Jesus is what really washes away our sins. So instead of offering animals, Paul teaches us to offer our bodies as LIVING sacrifices.

We show our loyalty to God by how we live. Our lifestyle is our sacrifice. Because of God's mercy, we now live for God. God saved our lives, so we live our lives for him. And when we live for God, it pleases him. It makes God happy. God delights when his people honor him with their decisions and actions and words. It's like when you're a teacher and your students actually listen to you. Or when you're a parent and your child obeys. Or when you are a basketball coach and your players do what you have trained them to do. They are happy. You are happy. That's how God feels when we obey him.

And we are not only living sacrifices in church, we are living sacrifices 24/7, every minute of every day. This verse teaches us about what I call "**church worship**" and "**life worship.**" When we gather together on Sunday mornings, our assembly is church worship. Very important and biblical. But it's only a part of our living sacrifice. When we walk out the door and go to our communities our worship continues in every aspect of our lives. That is "life worship" which is being a living sacrifice.

During my summers in college, I worked for Pella Parks and Rec. It was a great summer job. But we have very strict clock-in and clock-out times. We had one

of those old school punch cards where you slide in your timecard and go “click” and the machine would punch the time onto the card. Every day, we clocked in at 7:30 and clocked out at 3:30. In between those times, we were “on the clock.” We had to be working when we were on the clock. After we clocked out, we were done. No need to mow or water flowers or mulch anything. As living sacrifices, we don’t punch in and out, we are always “on the clock.” We are living sacrifices for Christ at all times, in all places. Our eyes, hands, feet, tongues, and our bodies are the living sacrifice.

Phenomenal Phrase #3 - “Do not conform to the pattern of this world.” A

fascinating example about this is Kanye West. Kanye is one of the most popular rappers in the world. Until recently, his music and his lifestyle were not exactly pure. But it seems like the Holy Spirit has transformed Kanye through the birth of his daughters and some near death experiences from drug overdose. He shares a time in the hospital when he thought he was going to die and spent a few days reading the Bible nonstop. Kanye’s most recent album is called “Jesus is King” and includes, in my opinion, some awesome music. The sound quality is amazing and his lyrics are very biblical and Christ-centered. In one of his songs called Closed on Sundays, he says this, “Follow Jesus, listen and obey, no more livin’ for the culture we nobody’s slave.” Very powerful lyric coming from Kanye West. There is a very interesting 2 hour interview with Kanye on YouTube and in his interview he admits that his idol was culture. He confesses he was absolutely conforming to the pattern of this world. He wanted to be the trendsetter in music, in fashion, and in romance. But even at the top of his career when he, in the eyes of the world, has everything - money, mansions, cars, women, fashion, reputation - he realized the huge hole in his soul, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now he is traveling the country putting on what he calls “Sunday Services” in which he raps his new music and has a big church choir and orchestra that plays with him. Kanye is now using his platform and his influence to proclaim the good news of Jesus. And whether you believe his conversion was genuine or not, the gospel is being heard from millions of Kanye’s fans who probably haven’t really heard it before.

Romans 12 reminds us we do not have to “fit in with culture” or to “be cool according to culture.” Moses told the Hebrews not to be like the Canaanites. Jesus told his disciples to not be like the Pharisees. The Spirit is telling us not to be like the many self-centered and sexually immoral Americans out there. It is tempting to go with the flow of culture. And let me be very clear, American culture is not ALL bad. Affirm the good and critique the bad of our culture. There are many good things about our culture and we need to affirm those trends. But we need to be critical of the evil trends of our culture and fight against them. The Spirit through Romans is urging us to be change makers, fighting for God’s justice in our society.

Phenomenal Phrase #4 comes right after #3. Be transformed. The greek word used for transform is **Μεταμορφοῦσθε**. Does that sound like another word? **Metamorphosis!** That’s where the English word comes from. By the power of God, we are transformed from sinful people to Spirit-empowered people, just like caterpillars and miraculously transformed into butterflies. Look at that! How does that become that? If we knew nothing about caterpillars, we would never guess this stubby, crawly worm thing turns into a majestic flying creature with radiant colors.

In the same way, I think many people in the Twin Cities are caterpillars. They are chasing things in life other than God. They are crawling around the dirt not realizing their full potential. Don’t be a caterpillar, be a butterfly! Allow God to transform you. Go through Holy Spirit metamorphosis.

Phenomenal Phrase #5, the last phrase we will cover today, “Test and approve God’s will.” The “you” in “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is,” the “you” is plural in the Greek. A better translation is “you ALL will be able to test and approve what God’s will is.” Paul is writing to the church in Rome, not just to 1 person. In the same way, the Spirit is speaking to us as a church, not just as individuals. Important distinction because we need to think collectively. All of us need to ask this question, “What is God’s will for Calvary’s community involvement?” Since we are viewing God’s mercy, since we are

living sacrifices, since we do not conform to the culture but are transformed by the Spirit, how does God want us to be involved in our community? Are we doing this? Can we do this better?

Karl Barth, a Christian theologian who made it on the front of Time magazine - which doesn't happen very often, said this, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." He is encouraging Christians to know the culture, know your Bibles, and bridge the 2 together. This is the Sun Current, which is the local Edina newspaper. It's free. This newspaper helps me find out about stuff that is going on - community events, community needs, and community info. When I read it, I think "Hmmm... that's a good event I could go to." Or "That's a community need our church could help out with." I encourage all of us to know what's going on in our neighborhoods and to be a presence at community events. It's a great way in our culture to meet new people, to learn new things about our communities. Find out when the block party is in your neighborhood and go to it. You never know how the Spirit may use you through these events.

Pastor Nick and I are grateful that Calvary's council put community involvement in both our job descriptions. It communicated to us that this church wanted to be more involved in this community, that this church wanted to "love our neighbors as ourselves" as Jesus teaches us.

One example of our involvement is the **Rotary Club of Edina**. We go to the weekly lunches on Thursdays and have built many relationships with community leaders. We have been able to serve with other Rotarians are community opportunities like Camp Enterprise with high schoolers, packing Thanksgiving baskets, and reading books at local elementary schools. The people there are constantly asking about our church. We've had opportunities to share with the entire group about our work with Calvary Christian Reformed Church. The connections we've made through Rotary have directly impacted our ministry. 6

For example, for TC Serve this past summer, the serve weekend for middle schoolers, I was looking for a place the kids could shower. I walked into the YMCA at Southdale and happened to see another Rotarian doing sit ups. He came and talked to me and I told him I was looking for showers. "You should ask Greg!" Who's Greg? He's the administrator of this YMCA and he's in our Rotary club." So I ask for Greg and he's like, "Hey, you're 1 of those pastors who just joined our club." I was like yeah could kids shower here? "Oh yeah we can make that work." How much? "Don't worry about it."

Another example of Calvary's community involvement is Arrive Ministries. Here is a picture of all our **volunteers** who tutor Somali students on a weekly basis up in Hopkins. We ate together and shared stories about our tutoring experience. The Twin Cities is the 2nd largest population of Somalis outside of Somalia! Somalis are our neighbors and we are called to love them.

There are many other opportunities to serve in the Twin Cities Metro! We have VEAP down in Bloomington, Bibles for Missions up in Crystal, the Edina Art Fair down the street in June, Twin Cities Serve in August, and other opportunities to serve.

Romans 12:6 says "We have different gifts." Find something you care about, and become involved or make a ministry of it. Even though we are of 1 body as a church, we all have different gifts and functions and can all use them for the kingdom of God.

Verse 2 says the will of God is "good, pleasing, and perfect." It's not bad, boring, or a waste of time. It is good, pleasing, and perfect. God is accomplishing his grand story of redemption and we have important roles in it. There is nothing missing in God's plan, nothing false, nothing evil. As Jesus prayed, "your kingdom come, your will be done." Thanks be to God. Let's pray.