

Just for a moment I'd ask you to pause and think about how incredibly wonderful and beautiful God's creation is. What he has made is a masterpiece.. I want you to think about a place that you've been that you felt close to God just being in the majesty of his creation. Maybe it's been along our wonderful coastlines where you have seen God's beauty in creation. None of us have to go far to see the majesty of what he has created, of his majestic hands. The Bible says that the heavens declare the glory of God.

But do you know what God's greatest work of art is? It's not the North Coast, as incredible and impressive as it is. It isn't even the galaxies or the stars, the solar system in the sky. God's greatest work of art is you and me. We are his masterpiece. Ephesians 2:10 says, we are his workmanship. Without question, humanity is God's greatest creation. And each and every one of us are made on purpose and we are made for purpose. A lot of people spend their lives trying to work out what their purpose is, what was I made for? What was I created to do? Why do I exist? And the answer folks we find in the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism which is this - Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

You know when I was growing up and chose to truly follow the Lord Jesus in my life, I can remember it was at that same time that we had joined a new church family in Lisburn. And a gentleman in the church told me that the best thing that I could do now that I was settled in the church, was to start serving in the church. And I did, but as a result of it I truly found purpose in my Christian life, I grew so much in my Christian faith, and in fact I became more involved in the life of the church – whether that was worship, kids ministry, leading the youth fellowship, being involved in bible studies – it truly helped me grow. You know, that accountability of having a place to serve, being involved in other people's lives, and just having different experiences in the life of the local church, I have recognised how this has allowed me to grow in Christ. So what I want you to consider today if you want to grow in Christ, getting involved in serving others as you serve God, is going to help you be healthier, it's going to help others that you influence be healthier. But if you want this to be a healthier church, find out where God is calling you, and find a level of service that works with your other commitments, and let's see a church family be strengthened to influence the community at large. So we are going to discover how to do this in this passage from Romans 12 today.

I believe what God would love to see in our lives is us using God's gifts for his glory and our growth. So we are going to start by thinking about **why we serve**.

I wonder did you notice those opening words of Paul in this chapter. He begins by saying "*I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice*". Paul is emphasising its importance to our growth as God's people. He understands completely the importance of service. Now I get the fact that people see many reasons why they don't serve regularly – for example, they might say I don't know how to do something, I'm so tired in work, I'm going through a season in my life, my family have issues, I just want to come and receive. You know I understand all these, and I certainly do not belittle any of them. They are real, they are significant. But I also understand why Paul urges in the need to serve. He understands that the health of an individual and the growth of the local church and the body of believers is dependent on it. Paul says that we present ourselves as living sacrifices, in other words we offer ourselves selfless in our sacrifice to God as we serve others. And Paul says this is our true and proper worship. Serving is your expression of worship.

And so Paul says, don't conform to the pattern of this world. This is what Paul is urging you to resist. The world is trying to get us all to align to a set of values – to make worldly things more important than Godly things. Paul is urging us to stop. He wants us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In other words, all of our thinking before we come to Christ is wrong, wrong thinking about values, wrong thinking about ourselves, wrong thinking about the world, wrong thinking about morality – all those areas are off, so you need to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. And all those old things change through a rewiring of your spirit, and therefore through that your actions change accordingly. So Paul is saying that you can present yourself as a living sacrifice to God, serving him which is your proper act of worship, not being compelled by the wrong values to serve, but as you are transformed by God your desire to serve comes from your love of him – an awareness of what God has done for you.

Do you know I think we can so easily take for granted how much we are loved. We do it all the time in our relationships with our spouses, but I think even more we do it with God. We lose sense of how amazing is God's love for us. The truth of the Gospel is that none of us deserve God's love, and yet God comes and gives his life for us – we've just recognised that in the week's past in Holy Week. And so therefore we should be so moved in the awe of that, that we would understand that responding to God and yielding our lives and serving him, is a reasonable response.

So that's why we serve, but what about how we serve?

So, the first thought on this comes out of verse 3. **And it's all about acting in humility.** See yourself as God sees you, yes, he loves you, but he doesn't rank you more than others – no one is more important or unimportant. God wants to use all of us. But if you see any type of service within the local church as beneath you, then there's a problem with your thinking. If the musicians think of themselves more important than the person who cleans up after the service, then we have a problem. Or conversely if you think that you are not needed, or that you are unimportant, then that is damaging to you and to any church family that you are a part of. Each of us is needed in this body which Paul talks about here and in 1 Corinthians 12. Each part of the body when it is functioning well, when it's healthy, causes the rest of the body to function well. But similarly, if one part of the body isn't doing its part then the whole body suffers. All the parts are connected, and we also need to be humble in our roles within the body. We can't think that we are more important than others. Why? Well, if we do that, then there will be others in the body that will feel less than you. I can remember a situation of someone, a musician, who I was with who thought they didn't need to come along to practices. They would turn up for the worship events that I was involved with after we had already practiced, and yes they were really good at their skill but it made the rest of us feel angry, and in turn it affected the whole worship team at that time. What you choose to do, or what you choose not to do, has a ripple effect on the body which is why we all need to see ourselves as equal and we all need to see ourselves as servants. Remember that Jesus was the greatest person ever, but he was also the greatest servant ever. He's the one who takes off his cloak after the supper and washes his disciples feet, and then after it he says this in John 13, "*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*". Folks, we need to follow that model of humility.

The second thing about serving is that we should be united and diverse. Verse 4, '*For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others*'. So folks remember that no gift that we have should be self sufficient, nor should any gift be unnecessary. We all have different abilities, but we are united together, because we are part of the overall purpose. And unity is an interesting thing within a church. Because

there are some people here today that you will be happy to spend time with serving, but the reality is that there will be others here today that you will not be happy being around for any length of time. But that's ok because the thing that unites us is the purpose we have in Christ. We may normally be challenged with our differences but it's our unity in lifting the name of Jesus that keeps us together in purpose.

You know I've often thought coming into 27 years of marriage that things would be so much easier if Alison just thought and acted the same as me, and I'm sure she has thought the same that I should be like her. Well, we all know the reality is that that's not going to work. But the wonderful thing about Marriage as God designed it is that you have two individuals with differing thoughts, but that God unites in this covenant, and they work their differences out together, it's two becoming one as they die to their own wishes but work towards the greater purpose of family. And it's the same of church; we are all different, we all want to do things in the church in different ways, but God brings us together so that we can discover how we are truly united in Christ. And that's how we grow. Verse 7 tells us that we all have gifts, and we are all different in what we have been given from God. Those gifts are unique to you, and the goal is not for you to have someone else's gift, but for you to discover how God wants to use your gifts to influence and affect and bless others. We have to grow contented with the gifts that God has given to us, and it's not to swap ours with someone else's. That's why we come together as a community of faith.

So we are to be humble in serving, we are to be united, and then we are to be useful.

In verse 6 Paul says we have all these different gifts. And the Greek word here is the word *Charisma*. When we think of charisma, we think of someone with a dynamic personality but we are not talking about that here, Paul here means that we have spiritual gifts that God has given that could not be made by human intellect. It's special from God, and he has wired us all differently. And so, Paul outlines that whatever that gift is, it needs to be used. Having a gift and not using it, is sad.

Over the Easter holidays I decided to clear out some stuff in the house that had been sitting for a while. One of the things was a series of books I was gifted when I was studying in Dublin. I realised as I lifted them to put them into a box that these books, some quite expensive, had never been opened by me. That's really sad, because these books would have been funded for my growth and learning. And so in 13 years these books had gathered dust, never opened or read. It's quite sad isn't it.

You have gifts and when you don't use them, when you put them on a shelf, for whatever reason, those gifts can very easily just sit and gather dust. Now there's a time when we need to rest from things, and I don't want to discourage any of you from doing that, but sometimes we can go into hibernation for a bit too long. These gifts are given to us to be used to build others up in their faith. My role as a Pastor is to equip the saints, that's all of you, so that you are built up in the faith in order that you can do what God has called you to do. The job is not for me to do it. I have to ensure that I use my gifts according to what God has given me, but I am to encourage and equip you to do what God requires of you. It is not good to see people doing multiple things in the church, especially if we understand how God shares gifts accordingly. And yet the church grows, and more people come and they develop, they discover their gifts and start to use their gifts, and then more people come and suddenly they just think that everything is working great – it's an amazing church community offering so much, so they put their feet up, chill and just like a consumer enjoy receiving while the demands on a core group of people become more pressing. And do you know what happens through that – they don't grow in the same way, the church feels the

pressure. If all of us are healthy and using the gifts that God has given us, not only will we be healthier and blessed in our own growth, but we will see others growing and able to use their gifts also for God's glory. And so, in other words, if you neglect your part, somebody else regrettably may have to pick up the slack. And please don't think this is me trying to shame or make you feel guilty. It's just to understand that if we each find out the little part that we are called to do, and we do that, then we cultivate a healthier church. We each have to decide how much we give to the marketplace and how much we give to God's family. God's family should never get our second best. Yes the marketplace needs to have a good chunk of our time, because that's what pays the bills and puts food on the table. But if you look at your life, and it's about looking after the family, caring about your work, taking care of school, and there's little for serving God, then there's a big problem. We are not here to consume; we are here to be a part of a community of faith where each one gets to do their part.

Now then Paul lists out a series of gifts in verses 6&7 - prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, showing mercy, but this list is not exhaustive folks. In fact there are other lists in I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, I Peter 5, and none are meant to be exhaustive. You won't see the gift of art listed here, for example that the Genesis group does, or you won't see the gift of interceding in prayer, but these are gifts that God has given to be used. So, understand that you may have a gift that's not listed, but if you feel it is from God for building up others, then run with it. Whatever the case, start using the gift. Don't allow it to sit dormant.

Now just one wee personal note I want to make for you all on this as I close. I've heard it said that people like being asked by the rector. And if I think there's something that I feel some of you can do to build up the church I will ask you. But if I don't ask you, then why not come to me and offer. I can guarantee you that if you speak with me about a God given gift that you want to develop and explore further within this Church family, I will work to support you. And it's much more important to get up, start using it, rather than sitting back waiting for the rector to find you and ask you. Come and speak with me. So, we've seen why we serve, we have seen how to serve with humility, unity, and to do it. So, my encouragement to you is to respond to God's love for you. The last thing I want anyone to feel today is - I'm not good enough, I feel guilty, I don't measure up. I just want to encourage you to know your place in God's house. Don't go another week where you remain stagnant. And so to help with this, on the way out, the wardens are going to hand every one of you a page that simply gives you an idea of all the things that go on in our church family – it's there not to provoke you – it's there to give you ideas. And you will see at the very bottom of the list, it says the words 'and all the other things that God has planned for us to do for him'. In other words, this is not an exhaustive list but very much open to how God may be working in your heart with your specific gifts, and with my help we can maybe discover other things that we as a body can develop to encourage us all in his service and in his glory. Let me pray as I finish.

Lord God I want to thank you for this amazing group of people. I thank you for what you are doing in each of our lives. I pray that you would help each and every one of us to take the next step that we might grow, and we might help others grow, that we might be satisfied and that you would be glorified. In Jesus' name, Amen.