Catch the Vision

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We have all watched children play the party game “Pin the Tail on the Donkey.” It’s cute to see children become disoriented after spinning around and then to observe whether they can come even close to hitting the mark. While it’s a cute party game, it’s also a sad metaphor for life. Many feel like they are blindfolded—unable to see the target they are aiming at when it comes to living their lives. Even those of us who want to follow Christ may feel like life or our culture or any number of other factors are spinning us around leaving us disoriented wondering if we are headed in the right direction, let alone hitting the mark.

We have just concluded a sermon series on the five strategic goals that our session is considering. Our session has also adopted a new mission statement for our church: Becoming Like Christ Together for the World. People have asked me, “What does that mean? Is it possible to become like Christ? And if so, what does that look like? What is the target we are aiming for?”

For the remainder of the summer, we will be attempting to answer those questions as we explore a variety of passages that summarize beautifully what the target is we are aiming for—becoming like Christ together for the world. We are calling our summer sermon series “The Life You Have Always Wanted.”

We want to catch the vision of The Life You Have Always Wanted, because we have to know what we are aiming for before we can arrange our lives to hit that target. Our first passage today is from Romans 12, and it is a great introduction to our series and our mission of Becoming like Christ Together for the World.

Let’s look at verse 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.”

Whenever you see the word “therefore,” it’s important to ask the question, “What is the therefore there for? The grounding for everything Paul is about to say from this point forward is based on what he has already said in the previous eleven chapters. In short, Paul has made clear that every person is guilty of sin—that is, missing the mark of God’s holiness—and is separated from God and helpless to do...
anything about it. But Jesus Christ accomplished for us what we could not accomplish on our own. “By the mercies of God,” as Paul says, we have been saved through Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension. It is God’s doing, not ours.

Now this is important. Do you hear what I am saying? By the mercies of God we are now free from sin and able to receive and live the life we always wanted. This life is not just a possibility; it already exists. The life we always wanted is the life we were created and redeemed in Christ to live. It is already ours by grace. So what? So what is the natural response to God’s mercy and grace in Jesus Christ? “To present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Paul alludes here to the sacrificial offerings in the Old Testament. Instead of presenting dead animals as sacrifices for our sin, we recognize that Christ has already died for us. And now we are free to offer our whole selves to God as a living sacrifice that is pleasing and acceptable to God.

You may have heard the chicken and the pig joke: The chicken says, “Hey pig, I was thinking we should open a restaurant.” The pig says, "I don’t know. What would we call it?” The chicken says, “How about Ham and Eggs?” The pig says, “No thanks. I’d be committed, but you’d only be involved.”

So many approach the Christian life from a perspective involvement like the chicken. We see our lives as our own, and so we can pick and choose what we give to God and how much we give to God. But Paul is coming from the perspective of the pig, understanding that we are already dead. Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Our lives are not our own. By grace, we have been saved and we now belong to God. Jesus gave himself for us, and now we are to give ourselves to him. It is an expression of our gratitude for what God has already done for us. We offer ourselves to God, realizing that all that we are and all that we have is a gift of God’s grace. So presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice is not a one-shot deal. It’s not something we do once a year, or even once a week in coming to church or giving money or time volunteering. We are to present our whole selves to God. But unlike the OT sacrifices, living sacrifices can crawl off the altar, and the truth is we frequently do. So it is the action of continuing to present ourselves to God in all the moments in all the days of
So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.”

-Eugene Peterson

Our lives. We are to give ourselves to God as a continual way of life

Listen to how Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message: “So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.” This is spiritual worship—giving your whole life as a thank offering to God and for the glory of God. “Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossian 3:17).

Now let’s look at verse 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.” J.B. Phillips puts it this way: “Don’t let the world squeeze you into its mold.” We must not be naïve to the ways we are conditioned to the patterns of the world. That is, our relationships, activities, and the very culture in which we live are shaping us all the time—for good and for ill. But we are called to be transformed. What does that mean? The word for transform comes from the same Greek root as our word metamorphosis. Here is a simple definition: To transform is to make a thorough or dramatic change in the form, appearance, or character. So the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly is a good illustration.

But what is Christian spiritual formation or spiritual transformation? As our first strategic goal states, it is “The process of becoming like Christ for the sake of others.” The dramatic change is meant to be in our character. Our character is to become more like Christ. The theological term is sanctification. We are being made holy. Though we are free from the penalty of sin, we are still engaged in the process of being transformed from sinner to saint in our attitudes and actions. We are more and more reflecting the character qualities of Jesus—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. This transformation is a work of God’s Spirit in us, and these qualities are the fruit of that work.

How does transformation happen? It happens through the renewing of the mind. And the way that the mind is renewed is by the power of the Spirit and the truth of God’s word. That is why reading, studying, meditating, and memorizing God’s word is so important. We need to listen to God and allow the Spirit to use God’s word to renew our minds. As our minds are renewed, our beliefs will change, our actions will change, and our lives will change.
Transformation is an ongoing process and ultimately a work of the Spirit, but it is our responsibility to cooperate with God in what he is doing in our lives by engaging in various disciplines so that God can renew our minds and bring about the transformation that is needed.

It’s important, in reading this passage, that we understand that Paul is not speaking to individuals; he is speaking to the church—the community of God’s people. We live in an independent, individualized culture but, in verses 3-8, Paul wants these believers and us to realize that presenting our whole lives to Christ is a community endeavor.

Our mission statement is “becoming like Christ together for the world.” This is something we do together. We are to live and grow and serve together because we are all part of the body of Christ. Humility is an essential quality for community life. Humility means to know our place.

I have told you before that when I was in high school, I played basketball. We had a great coach, who was able to help each person develop to her fullest potential and then helped us to play as a team. I personally wasn’t a great athlete. I didn’t score a lot of points. But I knew my place. I learned my part. I practiced a lot, understanding the part I played to serve the team.

I remember well one of the teams we played frequently in basketball. They had a girl who was really tall—much taller than anyone else on our team or most opposing teams. Their strategy—their one play—was to get the ball to Betty. They won some games, but they never beat us because we had more than one person, one play, or one strategy. Each of us understood the part we played, but we were a team. So we played as a team, and we won as a team.

Some people have the idea that the church is meant to use the “throw-the-ball-to-Betty” strategy, relying on one or a few to get the job done. But the body of Christ is made up of every person who belongs to Christ, and each of us has to find our place on the team, if you will, and do what we can to love and serve the people and the Lord. I love the way The Message puts Romans 12:3-8:

“Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without envously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.”

The good news is that it’s not all up to you. God doesn’t
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- C. S. Lewis

expect you to be or do everything. We have to know our place as a part of the whole body. Life is meant to be lived together with others. We are to grow and serve together. That’s our mission: Becoming Like Christ Together for the World. We need each other, and the world needs us.

And that leads into the last section of Romans 12. After speaking of the importance of living as a community, Paul changes his style as he rapidly fires off a list of seemingly unrelated commands. But actually, everything in this section could fit under the heading of “love in action.” The highest priority God gives us in life is to love Him wholeheartedly and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

The problem in talking about love is that it can be a vague and often misunderstood idea. People fill it with almost any meaning they want. Love is often equated with being nice or as an emotion that people regularly “fall” in and out of.

But Biblical love is not an emotion. As C. S. Lewis said, “Love is not an affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person’s ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.” What does that practically look like? In verses 9-21, Paul paints a very vivid picture with his words of what love in action looks like.

I’m not going to go over every one of these phrases, but I will tell you I have been pondering each of them and rolling them over and over in my mind, and I will continue to do so. I encourage you to do the same and so allow the Spirit to renew your mind on what love in action really looks like.

But even more than that, I want to encourage you to act. Many people wait to feel love and affection for someone before they act. C. S. Lewis writes in Mere Christianity: “Do not waste time bothering whether you love your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.”

Please don’t see this passage as a checklist to try to accomplish. See it as a description of the kind of actions God desires us to choose. These are the practical ways we love in the course of our everyday, ordinary lives. So, in the midst of ordinary relationships, work, and even difficult circumstance, we can put love in action by making these kinds of choices. These choices will not always be easy or natural, but as we step out in faith, God will change us and make us more loving, more like Christ.

You see, the desired outcome of spiritual transformation is not about you. It’s not
...the desired outcome of spiritual transformation is not about you. It’s not for your worldly benefit; it’s for the benefit of the world.

Jesus gave a new commandment saying, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). The love of Christ is now manifested to the world through us—not individually but as the body of Christ—the community of Christ. We are sent to love the world as Jesus has loved us.

But let me be clear. Love can only be expressed and experienced concretely. So here are some thoughts for your consideration. Don’t try to love everybody. You cannot love the whole world. Only God can do that. God doesn’t ask us to do the impossible. He hasn’t asked you or me to love everyone. He has called you to love your neighbor as yourself. The word “neighbor” comes from an old English word that means “near.” Your neighbor is the person near you. The body of Christ together can love the people of the world as each of us loves our neighbors as ourselves.

So start with the few closest to you. Make a list of the 8-12 people to whom you are closest and really decide to love them. If you are married, the number one person is your spouse and then your children, parents, other family, and friends. Begin to really pay attention to them, pray for them, make choices to practice what this passage says by showing love, honor and affection for them. So often in the busyness and hurry of life, those closest to us are the ones who pay the price of our not being loving.

Then, love and serve the people God brings across your path. In the course of our everyday, ordinary lives, we encounter people all the time—people in your neighborhood, at work, or your children’s school, or here at the church. Even people we encounter at the grocery store or on vacation. Be present to the moment and pay attention to the people God brings across your path, and seek to be loving in every interaction and encounter you have with others. Sometimes you will come across difficult people—even enemies, and we are called to love and serve even them, as well.

Then, seek out opportunities to show love. Opportunities abound in our bulletin each week to teach children, volunteer in student ministry, lead a small group, and care for the needs of others in a variety of ways within the church. Again, there are so many opportunities, it can be overwhelming. You can’t do everything, but you can do something. That’s why it is important to know yourself—your gifts, your passion, your availability of time, and then pray and ask the Lord what is the part you are to play in the body of Christ to show the love of Christ. I’m so thankful for the 118 people...
...learn to live without being in a hurry.

“In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in ‘muchness’ and ‘many-ness,’ he will rest satisfied.”
- Richard Foster

giving themselves to God to love children at VBS this week.

But, of course, we are not only concerned with ministry within the church; we also want to participate in mission outside the church. We want you to see your everyday, ordinary life as a mission where you are loving those people God brings across your path; but we are also committed to equipping and sending people called to mission work. As you know, many are participating in summer mission projects. And I encourage all of you to make plans now to participate in Labor for your Neighbor on Labor Day weekend. This is an opportunity for us as a church to seek to love and serve others together.

In closing, I want to say this. If you want to be loving, you have to decide to be loving and then do the things that will help you be loving. This passage is a great picture of what that looks like. But one of the simplest things we can do to become more loving is simply to learn to live without being in a hurry. Richard Foster writes, “In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things; noise, hurry, and crowds. If he can keep us engaged in ‘muchness’ and ‘manyness,’ he will rest satisfied.” Foster goes on to say that “hurry is not of the Devil; it is the devil.”

This is one of the biggest lessons I am struggling to learn and apply in my own life. A wise man recently told me that the really important thing in life and ministry is to not try to do too much. Because when we try to do too much, we hurry. And when we hurry, what gets squeezed out is love. We can’t love in a hurry. Each of us is responsible to arrange our lives so that we are not in such a hurry that we fail in hitting the most important target of all. Jesus came into the world that we might know and experience God’s love for us and to make us the kind of people who are able to share his love with others. Today is just the start of our sermon series, but I hope you are beginning to catch the vision for The Life You Have Always Wanted.