

God's Plan 3-10-02

Romans 12:1,2

There are a number of books out in the Christian realm that tell pastors how to go about building their congregations. Church growth experts tell me I'm suppose to give you a vision for where we as a church are headed. These experts say that over my first few months I should present you with a carefully laid out plan of action to excite you about what can happen. But as I look at the writings of the Apostles to the churches I don't see them giving those churches a specific plan for each church. They are not instilling a great goal for them to rally around that will unite them. They don't present a systematic plan for reaching their community with the Gospel. They do however give them a vision and a goal that is unattainable by man. The goal is to be like Jesus!

The Apostle Paul wrote, Col 1:28-29 (NIV)²⁸ *We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.*²⁹ *To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.* Paul said, "We are working very hard to present you mature in Christ Jesus." Certainly we see his mission to share the Gospel with those who had never heard, but he also had this burning desire, that we read of here, to see the believers mature, grown up, really knowing Christ. That is the motto of this church, "To know Christ and to make Him known." You notice that to know Him comes first, before making Him known. We won't be effective in making Him known until we know Him personally and intimately. Many times our witness is from the testimony of our life, our genuine love and concern for all. Just as Jesus' witness was His demonstration of the fruits of the Spirit in every circumstance, so should our witness be. That is the life of Jesus manifested in us. We know Him and that knowing relationship presents His testimony to the people we meet. That gives us an opportunity to make Him known. So we see Paul was presenting the goal of perfection – which in Greek also means 'maturity'. He wanted to see each and every believer mature in Christ. Then everything else will fall into place.

The author of Hebrews expressed the same goal when he wrote in 10:14, *by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.* Jesus made you perfect before the Father but in your day to day life you are being made holy. This is what Paul was referring to when he said he labored to see us perfect or mature in Christ. This process is going on in our daily lives as we hear the teaching of the word or read God's word ourselves and apply it to our lives. The Holy Spirit brings conviction and we learn to walk in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit.

The Apostle Peter expressed it like this, 1 Peter 1:14-15 (NIV)¹⁴ *As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.* ¹⁵ *But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do;*

Being holy is being mature. To be entirely the Lord's. To be holy means to be dedicated to His use, not some untouchable 'do-gooder'. Jesus was holy and He was very approachable and humble.

In Peter's second letter he elaborated on this goal even more. 2 Peter 1:3-4 (NIV)³ *His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.*⁴ *Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*

He said that God's power has given us everything we need for life and godliness. Godliness is being holy, being dedicated to God, mature. He goes on to say that we participate in God's divine nature and escape corruption in the world caused by evil desires. How? It's through the promises in His Word and our knowledge of Him.

Do you see how Paul, Peter, and the author of Hebrews shared the same goal for the congregations to which they wrote? They wanted them to know Jesus in an ongoing life altering way. This is an increasing surrender to the life of Christ in you, until you can say with the Apostle Paul, "It is no more I that live, but Christ that lives in me." Isn't that the goal of God for all His children, to be Christ-like? If we know God in an ever-deeper life changing way, then people will come to know Him through us. On the other hand, if we act like mere men, we will certainly drive people away. The Apostles knew that if their congregations were maturing into men and women of God, filled with the life of Christ then they would be transforming their towns and countries wherever they lived. Transformed people transform towns. That is exactly what happened in the first few centuries after Christ. The spread of the Gospel was so rapid because lives were maturing in Christ Jesus. Christians (little Christs) were being formed everywhere. The Apostle Paul said he was having delivery pains for Christ to be formed in the believers of Galatia. When the life of Christ is formed in us, then the world around us is changed by the presence of Christ in us.

Let this be our goal, maturity in Christ. Let us grow up to be like Him. There will always be weeds among the wheat, but if every blade of wheat grows to have a full head of grain imagine what it would look like. Our church full of little Christs (Christians) will have a transforming affect on our city. It has happened in other cities around the world. Someone surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. They yielded their life completely to Christ and He led them in such a way that they were an example to others whose lives were changed, until the whole town was transformed. Cali, Columbia went from being the drug capitol of the world to a worship center, with churches bursting at the seams. Kiambu, Kenya was said to be the graveyard of pastors. Public officials would pay bribes not to be assigned there. Now it is filled with overflowing churches and experiencing a 30% growth. Those places were strongholds of evil – just like Sedona, but somebody said, "I will be completely the Lord's for the sake of the people here."

If we don't mature in Christ we will certainly pollute any work that Jesus wants to do through this group of believers. I have probably upset some of you. You may be thinking, "Who does this young guy think he is telling me I need to grow up?" If it was the need of the church in Jerusalem and Galatia and Rome and Colasae why would we be so proud as to think it is not the need right here? We are full of Bible knowledge but is our life expressing Jesus?

In the letter to the Romans Paul used the first 8 chapters to clarify what it meant to be saved, to be in Christ. In 9 through 11 he speaks of his burden for Israel. In chapters 12 to the end he gives them some wonderful discipling pointers. It is lessons on growing up – his goal for the church in Rome. We will take a look at what he taught them over the next few weeks.

Romans 12:1 (NIV)¹ *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.*

Chapter 11 tells us of the wonderful grace of God that has reached out to all mankind to draw us to Himself. We have become recipients of the words and testimonies of the faithful who have gone before. It was not from anything we did but all because of His merciful grace. "Therefore," He says, "I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy," considering that God has been so

merciful to you, I beg you. I plead with you. Please, start and continue your growth in Christ by lying down on God's altar. This is where discipleship begins, the first stage of real growth. We present our body as a living sacrifice, to no longer be our own, but for our entire being to belong to the One who made us, redeemed us, and called us to be like Jesus.

This is not about salvation. You've already been a recipient of that when you first asked Jesus to forgive you. This is when you get out of the driver's seat of your life and let Jesus take the wheel. It is when you have been drawn by the love of God to the place where you are ready to say with Jesus, "Not my will but Thine be done." You give back to God the body He gave you realizing that not only does He deserve to be Lord, but also that He has better plans for you than you could make for yourself. Suddenly your choices are no longer yours to make but His. He wants to use the parts of your body as instruments of righteousness. Think of the affect that would have on our community if a group of believers would truly surrender their bodies to Christ as living sacrifices. If the Holy Spirit directed our conversations they would convey the love of God for the lost.

The world has yet to see what can happen through a life totally surrendered to God. The only one we've ever seen is Jesus. Look there, and you'll see how much can be accomplished by a life surrendered to God. What would happen if you surrendered to God? How would your life change? I can assure you it would be a lot more exciting than a life lived by sight. A life of faith is full of difficulty but it is fulfilling and thrilling. Every difficulty makes you more dependent on the One who is unlimited.

I remember when this verse (Romans 12:1,2) first gripped my heart. I was one block from here at the corner of Apple and Jordan. I was 12 years old, and Pastor Ira Day was preaching from this verse. I didn't hear much of what he said because the Holy Spirit was preaching so loud the words of this Scripture. God was speaking this verse to me personally. I knew it was God but being a 2-year-old boy I had a lot of living wanted to do, so I asked God for a sign. The hymn we sang at the close of the service had Romans 12:1 as a reference under the title. That was a good enough sign for me. I knew if I said, "No", I would be saying no to the Holy Spirit. As the hymn began I knew I had to go down the aisle. I remember talking with Pastor Day after the service and asking how I could be a living sacrifice. He encouraged me to take my Bible to school and that would give me opportunities to tell people about Christ. I did that and God did give me opportunities. A couple years ago a man named Mark Rose called me from Ohio. I hardly remember witnessing to him. He's now the Pastor of an Assembly of God church there and he just wanted to thank me for sharing Jesus with him when we were in High School.

I have taken back the driver's seat a number of times, but when I do I get very nervous because I'm a terrible driver. I know an accident is just waiting to happen when I'm at the wheel. Some of us are like the drunk who is amazed at his driving ability, when in reality he is weaving all over the road and about to have a head on collision. Face the fact that you don't know how to drive or even where you're going. Make Jesus your designated driver.

I hope and pray that this morning the Holy Spirit is preaching this verse personally to you like He spoke it to me. Before we as a Christian fellowship are going to impact Sedona, we must be God's instruments to do with us as He pleases. We must lay down our bodies as living sacrifices so that He can use them without us getting in the way, with our own ideas and desires. Will you listen in your spirit as the Lord calls to us? Hear Him say, *'Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with*

you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice--the kind He will accept. When you think of what He has done for you, is this too much to ask?

What is your plan today? What are your dreams? The person who has climbed up onto the altar will answer, "To love and obey my Lord." We can say the same for this fellowship. Our plans and dreams should be to love and obey our Lord, and let Him lead us. We all have ideas about where the Lord may be leading, but I believe the first leading of the Holy Spirit is individual surrender. Then we can surrender the fellowship here into His hands. Then and only then will God have His way with Wayside Chapel. When we come to Christ for salvation He comes and indwells us as the Life giving Spirit. When we place ourselves on the altar as a living sacrifice every area of our life becomes available for His use. We wonder why the Lord is not using us but our fingers are wrapped tightly around the steering wheel of our life. We pray for God to use us but we are everywhere but on the altar available for His use.

In the Old Testament when something was placed on the altar it became holy. Jesus said the altar is most holy so the gift placed upon it becomes holy. You may think your life is too marred by the past or even present desires, but if you place yourself on the altar as a living sacrifice, the altar makes you holy. You don't defile it; it transforms you. Jesus said, "The altar sanctifies the gift." (Matt 23:19) When my flesh tries to rise up and claim some right then I pray, "Lord, take these desires back on the cross where I put them years ago, and fill my spirit with Your desires."

The last part of this verse says this is our reasonable or spiritual act of worship. If your life is not on the altar then you are not really worshipping God with it. Worship goes on Sunday morning but a life on the altar worships with every breath. You might think that is too lofty a hope. In chapter 8 Paul says those who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God. That is the life of a living sacrifice, constantly led by the Spirit.

Romans 12:2 (NIV)² *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

The tendency of man is to conform to his surroundings. I saw this clearly living abroad for 8 years. Every culture has its norms and we adapt to the one we live in. We like to fit in and feel accepted. The problem is this world is under the control of the Prince of Darkness. The pattern of the world is evil. So Paul warns us not to conform to it. The pattern of the world is selfishness and self-fulfillment and trusting in man and his abilities. Instead, let your mind be renewed in knowledge. Know why you react the way you do, make sure it comes from the Spirit and is not conforming to the world around you. We have our citizenship in heaven, and our lives should show it. They will if we are led by the Spirit.

In Sunday morning Bible study we are looking at the 'Mind of Christ' to see how our minds should be renewed in knowledge. We need to think in synch with the Spirit. The old habitual way of thinking and responding must go as we learn to walk by faith and not by sight. We learn to depend on the life of Christ within us instead of our natural abilities and the wisdom of this world. Realizing what is seen is temporal but what is not seen is eternal gives us a whole new perspective on all we do.

Once you are a living sacrifice and your mind is being renewed you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, His good, pleasing and perfect will. If you have a hard time discerning God's will, it may be because your life is not on the altar, your mind is not being renewed. The Lord knows we are still at the stage of choosing our own way and will not force His will upon us.

So what is the vision for Wayside I'm trying to convey to you? It is the same one that the Apostles taught their churches, to grow up in Christ Jesus. It is to present mature sons and daughters of God for His use right here and in the community. Let us give ourselves to Him completely as living sacrifices. Take your hands off the steering wheel of your life so that God can direct you. We need to do that individually and collectively.

Romans 12:2 (NIV)² *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

If you were arrested for being a Christian, could your prosecutors find enough evidence to convict you? Are you so conformed to the world that you are no different? A Barna poll showed that the life of the average American Christian differed very little from that of any other American. American Christianity as a religion has conformed to the world's ways and so we see the world's results.

When I left Sedona 30 years ago, I was an easy target for a radical Christian cult. That's because I did not see any difference in the people in the churches of Sedona and those of the world. They played the same selfish games about power and control. I didn't see anyone witnessing let alone dying to themselves to be an example of Christ in the world. It appeared to be all about numbers, dollars and power. That is conformed to the world. No wonder when I saw people reading their Bibles and trying to share Jesus with others I was ready to join. Anything that looked remotely like the early church, then I was ready to jump right in.

Young people today are just as idealistic as I was, if not more so. They know when they see hypocrisy. They hear the message of love but then see a refusal to pay the price to live it. Where do they turn? What will grip their heart that looks like the real thing? And whose fault is it? Why didn't anyone take the time to mentor me? The church got rid of Pastor Ira Day. "I mean, he had the nerve to wear the same suit every Sunday. Besides that, he never dusted his desk. Can you imagine! And to top it off, he had four kids, on his measly salary. Would a godly man do that?" That attitude is the kind of Christian example I witnessed. Do the young people today see any difference in today's churches? If not, we are feeding them to the wolves. No one else took the time to show me what it meant to live the Christian life, maybe because they didn't make a commitment to live it themselves.

The Holy Spirit is calling out this morning for you to present yourselves as living sacrifices. There is no limit to what God can do through a man or woman fully yielded to Him. Christian man or woman, you who are in God's word and led by the Holy Spirit – will you lay down your life on the altar to mentor some young person who is searching after God? Will you take the time to love them and be an example to them, sharing life-changing truths from God's word? Some of you feel you can't because you don't live a life on the altar. It is never too late to start. Surrender this morning. Turn the steering wheel over to the One who knows where you're going. The next generation needs you. Remember Haggai – in his early 80s went out like a ball of fire. Don't be conformed be transformed by the renewing of your mind! Wash your mind in the word of God so your actions reflect His thoughts. We should be living transformed lives so others can see Jesus is real. Sedona needs a church full of living sacrifices, transformed not conformed. Will you lay yourself on the altar this morning for the One who laid Himself on a cross for you? Will you make a commitment this morning to surrender to the Life that will transform your life into His likeness? ...*this is your spiritual act of worship.*