

Good morning. For those who don't know me, my name is Rick Ellis, and I am one of the elders here at Grace Community Church. As he has done the past few years, pastor Ross is starting a summer break, giving us a chance to hear from several of the elders over the next few weeks. To hear what is on their hearts from scripture – and today is my turn.

I think that we can all agree that the past 18 months have been unusual. That the whole COVID pandemic and especially the world's response to it were unprecedented and at times odd. One of the strangest pictures that is stuck in my head are scenes from sporting venues around the world where athletes competed to either empty stands or even worse stands filled with cardboard cutouts. In some places die hard fans could pay to have their pictures put on those cut-outs to show their support for the team. To see entire stadiums that should hold 70 or 80,000 people totally empty, and to think of the raucous crowds that would normally attend a soccer match or football game seemed wrong. I thought that the whole purpose of professional sports was to entertain the audience. I thought that it was to put on a show that people would want to see. I know that people were seeing it on television, and I know that the real purpose is money and not entertainment for entertainment's sake – but still it got me to thinking that these sports had lost their primary purpose of entertaining the fan in the stands. In our passage today, Paul gives us a concise statement about the primary purpose of the church – and I can tell you it is not to entertain the people in the stands. In fact, Paul's view of the church is that it has no stands – it has no spectators. Everyone is on the field. Everyone is in the game. I heard a sermon from a young pastor down in Texas who did a great job of drawing out this analogy and the importance of believers getting out of the stands and onto the field. Even if it is just to be a water boy or a ball girl. I hope to help you see that each of us who has been purchased by the blood of Christ must be on the field. Being a Christian, being a part of this church family is not a spectator sport. Please stand with me while I read Romans Chapter 12 verses 3-8.

Before I jump into our verses, Romans 12:3-8, I think it is helpful to give a quick overview of where we are in this letter that Paul wrote to the church in Rome. It is a *letter*. It is a personal communication that Paul wrote - in chapter 1, verse 6 he tells us who he wrote it to - "all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" in other words, to the church. And of course, by extension it is a letter to all true churches including ours, Grace Community Church. Paul's original letter didn't include chapters but in our modern bibles, Paul spends the first 11 chapters – about 2/3 of the letter walking his readers systematically through God's plan for salvation. Most theologians would agree that Romans is the most complete and methodical presentation of Christ's gospel message in the bible. Paul begins by addressing man's sin and unrighteousness and God's just wrath against those sinners. He introduces the fact that God's grace is offered to those who have faith in Jesus Christ who provides an escape from God's holy wrath. In God's gracious gift of salvation, we are transformed by the Spirit, and we become heirs with Christ of future glory. Paul also describes the importance of sharing this good news with those who are perishing. It would be good for me to stop right now and say that there are some here among us this morning or some who will hear this message who continue to live in unrepentant sin. Some who have not yet understood the effect of their sin against Holy, Creator God and who have not yet sought God's forgiveness and free gift of grace. If that is you today, I want to ask you to stop right here, stop right now! Clear all distractions from your mind and hear me. You are in a precarious, desperate situation if you do not know Christ, if Christ does not know you. This is bad news indeed. But there is hope. It is found in Jesus Christ.

What should you do if you find yourself in this position right now? Acknowledge that you are at enmity with God. Agree with Him that you are a sinner deserving His just judgment, which is eternal damnation. Humbly confess that you have sinned against God, who alone is pure and righteous. Ask for His forgiveness and believe and trust in Jesus Christ who paid the debt for your sin at Calvary. Trust in Christ alone for salvation. God is so gracious! Don't let another day go by where you rebel against Him and run further from His loving kindness. There is nothing more important in your life than the state of your soul – it impacts all of eternity. Every one of us will be judged by God and either be eternally damned or eternally loved and glorified with Jesus Christ. I implore you to ensure it is the latter by fleeing to Christ. The first 11 chapters of Romans are a powerful presentation of what we are to believe which rises to a doxology of praise to God. In verses 33-36 of chapter 11 Paul writes, **"Oh the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been His counselor? Or who**

has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever Amen."

The letter could easily end right there. Paul has painted an amazing picture of the significance and beauty of Christ's work on our behalf. He has detailed the sinfulness of our sin against a holy God and the amazing grace that frees us from our sin burden. It would stand alone fully at this point, but I think that Paul rightly understood that his readers would be demanding to know "how then should I live?" How can I honor this glorious God? Paul, therefore, finishes the last 1/3 of the letter instructing his readers on how to live in light of God's saving grace. He tells them what will honor and please God. So 2/3 of the letter on what to believe and then 1/3 of the letter on how to live. We must first think and believe rightly and then we can live rightly.

As we jump into chapter 12, we are looking at the *first* things that Paul wants us to know about how the Christian is to live. The first and most important ideas that he desires his readers to know about life as a believer. After recounting how God moved us from a hopeless situation to a position of heirs with Christ of glory, Paul instructs us on what should be a simple act of thankful worship. Let me read the first 2 verses of chapter to you: **"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. 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."** These verses serve as the transition from that doxology at the end of chapter 11 to the specific instructions Paul gives in chapter 12. These verses are the hinge that move us from orthodoxy – right thinking to orthopraxy – right living. In them, Paul makes an appeal to the brothers – by the mercies of God – to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God and to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. This is important and I don't want you to miss this. Paul is teaching us to approach the Christian life in a way that dedicates both our bodies to service and our minds to the study and worship of Him. We must put first things first. I am about to talk to you about God's call to service in the body, but service without being transformed by the renewal of your mind through God's Word is fundamentally man-centered and ultimately weak. At the same, claiming to know Christ without serving Him is impossible. What must we put first? Studying, meditating, and reflecting on who God is and what He has done. This is found in God's Word. A.W. Pink wrote a short essay called "The Snare of Service" where he warns the readers of the dangers of serving without renewing your mind. He starts the letter with this – quote – "The main business and the principle concern of the Christian should be that of thanking, praising and adoring that blessed one who has saved him with an everlasting salvation, and who, to secure that salvation, left heaven's glory and came down to this sin cursed earth, here to suffer and die the awful death on the cross, that His people might be delivered from this present evil world." Thanking, praising, and adoring our blessed Savior should be our primary response to the gospel. Pink continues: "Our first great need is not to minister to others, but ourselves being ministered unto by the Lord. Our highest privilege is not that of being engaged in service for Christ, but for enjoying daily communion with Him. Our first great task is not to serve our fellow men, but to serve God by studying His word, learning His will and then doing it." Our walk with the Lord must start with knowing Him, abiding in Him and resting in Him. And yet, we are most clearly called to serve the body, to minister to one another, to love the brethren. We are called to good works!

Given that background, given all that Paul has shared about the work of Christ to gain forgiveness for ruined sinners, and given God's grace in working in and through our lives, Paul begins his practical exhortation to the readers with a call for us to participate as members of Christ's body – the church.

The primary focus for today is this: *The church is where all believers glorify God by humbly exercising the gifts that God has given us to love and serve each other.* Let me say that again. The church is where all believers glorify God by humbly exercising the gifts that God has given us to love and serve each other.

I want to start by showing you how I arrived at that summary statement. This is a good exercise for all of us to engage in when studying a portion of scripture. Look at the whole of the passage, consider related passages, and then boil down the message into a single sentence or phrase. Sometimes we call this the big idea of the passage. For today's message, I drew on our Romans passage as well as a parallel passage in 1 Peter 4:8-11. Peter is writing to believers who are suffering persecution and instructing them on how to live as a church in that context: **"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified**

through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” The church is where all believers glorify God - Look at verses 4 and 5 - “for as in one body we have many members” and “we, though many, are one body in Christ.” Though there are many of us and though we are all different, we are one body in Christ. There are 2 common definitions or ways for thinking about “the church” - The first would be the universal church. The Universal Church is the collection of all believers, from all time and all places, in other words all those who repented and believed in Christ for salvation - all those who will be in heaven. Elsewhere Paul presents the universal church as the bride of Christ - a singular bride for our savior. All those who will be united to Christ at the marriage supper of the lamb. Paul, however, here is referring to the second definition of the church: the local church. The local church is any body of believers in a particular place at a particular time. For example, this letter of Romans is written “To the church of God that is in Rome”. It was written to that body of believers that were in Rome around 57 or 58 A.D. We, Grace Community Church, are a church in West Allis in the 21st century. Paul’s point here is that this local church is made up of many believers who are called by God but they need to think of themselves as one body, not a bunch of separate, disconnected body parts and certainly not as lone rangers. The local church is one body.

From the Peter passage we understand that as a church, our desire should be to glorify God. If someone were to ask you - why does GCC exist? - I hope that at least part of your answer would be “to glorify God”. Sadly, there are organizations that call themselves churches that don’t have this as a goal. Ross preached on that last week. Churches, like people, can get too caught up in works and programs and lose their first love. Churches like people can get too concerned with fitting in or being comfortable so they fail to glorify God. Next, keeping this idea of the church in mind, we go back to our Romans verses, in verse 6 we read - **“having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”** We all have gifts - different gifts given by God in varying measures. God has uniquely determined which gifts each of us will have in specific measure. He sovereignly assigned to you and me these gifts as well as the opportunities to use them. Ephesians 2: 10 says “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” We are to steward well the gifts God has given us for His work in our local church. Remember, there are no spectators in the church - only team members who each play an important, necessary position.

Third, we use our gifts humbly - there in verse 3 - I say to everyone not to think more highly than he ought but to think with sober judgment. Humility is another of those topics that could easily occupy us for a series of sermons. Lack of humility, or pride, can be for a lot of us, one of the hardest sin patterns to break. Humility does not come easily; it is not valued in the world and it is very hard to teach. We have a perfect example in our Lord and Savior of humility. Being Christ-like in humility is clearly the work of the Holy Spirit causing us to consider others more significant than ourselves and serve the brethren with love. One quick thing here - when I think of humility, I think of it as 2 sides of the same coin. On one side we should not think more highly of ourselves than we ought - that’s clear - on the others side we should not discount the gifts that God has given us and fail to use them. It is prideful to boast or try and build ourselves up. It is also prideful to waste the gifts that God has given us by hiding them or being too timid or selfish to use them.

And finally, we glorify God by loving and serving each other. The New Testament has many places where believers are called to Love one another - it is the second greatest command that Jesus gave his disciples. The Apostle John lists love for the brothers as a primary test of whether you are in the faith. And how is it that we love one another? By serving, by speaking truth, by exhorting, by showing hospitality, by giving, by prayer- in short by exercising the gifts God has given.

Now that I’ve given you some background and highlights of these verses. I would like to discuss three main points that I want to bring forward today from this passage including some practical application for all of us.

First - *God is sovereign in gifting.*

Second - *humility and willingness to serve are crucial.*

Third - *serving makes us more like Christ.*

Starting with God’s gifting. Paul lists some specific gifts here in this passage, prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading and acts of mercy. There is a lot written in scripture and even more commentary about spiritual gifts. Paul writes about gifts here in Romans, Ephesians and 1 Corinthians. Peter also spoke of gifts in the passage I read earlier. I won’t spend time here on the similarities and differences between these lists, but will simply categorize them in 3 buckets: Sign gifts; Speaking gifts; Serving gifts

Sign gifts would be speaking in tongues, healing and miracles. Most scholars agree that these sign gifts were present in the early days of the church and have since ceased. There are a number of good reasons for drawing this conclusion that I would be happy to discuss with anyone who is interested.

The second group of gifts are spoken. These gifts involve speaking biblical truth into someone's life or situation. These include the gifts of preaching, teaching, prophecy, and exhorting. We will talk a little more about these in a minute.

The final grouping are the gifts related to service – hospitality, serving, acts of mercy, leading, and giving including financial giving.

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 12, Paul writes “there are a variety of gifts but one spirit, there are varieties of service but one Lord, there are varieties of activities but one God who empowers them all in everyone”. That along with our Romans passage and also 1 Peter make clear that God has gifted every one of us in some way. He has measured out His grace to each of us in some way to serve each other. I think that sometimes we think that this is an all or nothing proposition. We see it as black or white, I have a gift or I don't. For example, I might have the gift of teaching but not encouragement – so I will teach you but don't expect to feel good about it. You see how that black and white approach does not work. Someone else might say “I am not a naturally gifted in any way so I will just watch from the stands.” Or “I don't have as much to offer materially as someone else does so I will stay on the sidelines”. But here in Romans Paul shows us that we all are gifted “according to the grace given you”. If you are a believer, then God has extended His grace and blessed you at exactly the right level in all aspects of your life. You may have little gifting in one area but perhaps it is not zero gifting. Remember, your gifting and blessing are unique to you and the purpose that God has called you to. No two Christians are gifted alike. You may be gifted to teach one-on-one while another person is gifted to teach in larger groups. Maybe God has given you the gift of hospitality and a home that can host 30 people – you should host 30 people. If God has given you a home that can host 2 people, then be hospitable to 2 people. One is not better than the other – they both glorify God. One might be better at planning an event while another better at executing the plan. God will bring the two together for His glory. We are not called to exercise our gifts at the level of other people – we are called to exercise them at the level that God has given us the ability. I encourage you to be wary of comparing yourself to others. Later in 1 Corinthian 12 Paul uses the analogy of the human body to draw this out.

1 Corinthians 12:12 - For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. As a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a member of this body and God has sovereignly ordained your place and your importance to it. Don't be thinking that you are less important or that you have less opportunity to bless the rest of the body. We are all called by God for a purpose. I mentioned earlier that there are no spectators in the church and in the same way there are no unimportant parts of the body. I don't know about you, but I sometimes get caught up in the idea that everything that I do needs to be under the banner of a ministry. That it needs to be planned and organized by the church – the truth is life is much more about the day to day, the one on one ways that we serve and love one another. You might think of it as a ministry with a small m rather than than the formal capital M ministries. In many ways the capital M ministries are really meant to prepare us for little m ministries. We shepherd the flock and equip the saints so that they are prepared for good works. Every day we can use our gifting in the areas of exhortation, hospitality or acts of mercy. These are gifts that often don't take much money or much planning but they do take time and a willingness to be flexible. The church that we attend in Florida refers to this as mutual ministry. The times when we minister to each other through fellowship, encouragement and just time together. It takes time to get to know our brothers and sisters but you don't need a program for it. Others are encouraged when we take the time to listen to them, allow them to express their needs and concerns as well as their joys. Not in a

one way – tell me your problems and I will try to fix them – but in mutual sharing of one another’s hopes and burdens. I need to be honest, getting involved in other people’s lives can be messy sometimes. Knowing them deeply requires sacrifice on our part. There will be times when we need to do this in God’s timing not our own. You notice that I said God’s timing – not the other person’s timing or mine but God’s timing. That was a hard thing for me to learn – I used to think that my wife or my kids or others would choose the most inopportune time to need me, the worst time to want my attention – but I have come to realize that it was really God picking the time when I most needed to be taken away from my plans and get focused on HIS. Anybody else see that in your lives? I hope that it goes without saying that no sacrifice that you make will ever come close to the sacrifice that Christ made for you. Remember, we serve out of an outpouring of gratitude for the gospel. One specific gift that Paul mentions here is the gift of leadership. He writes at the end of verse 7 “the one who leads, with zeal” Leadership is a very broad area and there are volumes of books and lectures that you can find on the subject. We talk about some people being born leaders, others leading by example or leading from behind. Many people believe that leadership is an assignment that needs to be made – but in the same way that we talked before we need to see that leadership is something that we all do – according to the measure that God has given us. For some of us that means that we lead in modest ways with a small following. For others it is on a larger scale but we all lead at some point in our lives. Consider where you have influence, those are the places that you are a leader. Anywhere that other people look to you – to see how you react, to see how you choose – you are in a position of leadership – whether you want it or not. It may be in your home, your workplace, your extended family or your neighborhood. For some of you it might be on social media, so I remind you, people are watching so be zealous for God in all circumstances.

In addition to influence if you think of leading as first seeing a need, making a plan and getting it done – then we all lead pretty much every day. Most of us need to either get the kids to school, get ourselves to work, get to the grocery store or take the cat to the vet – whatever it is – we see a need, make a plan – which might be a simple, unwritten plan, and get it done. Getting a group of guys to come watch a ballgame takes leadership – planning a weekend family getaway takes leadership – we all lead.

Often leadership on a small scale, leads to future leadership on a larger scale – for example we just had VBS a few weeks ago. Our VBS program had a leader – Mary Piggott was the person who recognized the need, made a plan which involved getting curriculum, gathering volunteers, registering kids and so on and she got it done. Within that team there were others who led in the areas of teaching, or crafts or activities. Still others led the groups of children through the nightly events. These people led in a smaller capacity – but still they led – and maybe sometime later in another area – they can lead at a higher level. My point is that God gifted people with the abilities and the opportunities to use and grow those skills according to His sovereign purpose. God develops our gifts over a period of time. As I pointed out in the VBS example we can use a gift on a small scale now and develop it to be used at greater levels. There are some gifts that we can only use a few times a year – while others can be used daily to love and serve others. It is only by using your gifts that you will improve them and find more opportunities to use them. As I said before – we all are gifted at some level with the gift of leadership and there are numerous needs for leaders within our body. Look for where God is leading you to use those skills. We have a list of ministries here at the church with names next to most of those ministries identifying a leader. I think too often we look at those positions as a lifetime appointment. We think that so and so is the leader of that ministry and I would never want to step on their toes. Or maybe we think “I am not looking for a lifetime appointment so I better not volunteer”. A healthy church is one where ministry leaders are regularly transitioned. Where the current leaders are developing new leaders to take their places and where new ideas and new thoughts are regularly inserted to the ministry by new people. This will cause the ministry to be alive and will avoid the pitfall of burning out the leaders. The elders have talked about this, and we have a goal of increasing involvement and growing ministry leaders across all parts of the church. Paul calls us to give generously. This does not mean that we all give the same amount or even the same percentage of what we have. It means that we give out of the thanks that we have toward God and the blessings that he has given us. Giving is one of the gifts that God sovereignly assigned for each of us. One quick word about the gift of prophecy – we shouldn’t be scared by this. The gift of prophecy does not primarily mean being able to see or predict the future. At its core, prophecy involves speaking truth – and we all have the ability to speak truth to others – we need to be sure that it is scripturally based and spirit led – don’t go spouting off your opinions as prophecy. If you are talking with someone who is stuck in sin – telling them to repent and call on God’s grace through Jesus Christ in order to find forgiveness is a form of prophecy – you are speaking bible based, spirit led truth into that person’s

life. It takes some discernment and some grace to do it well but those are also gifts that God provides in abundance.

The gift of teaching is a broad one and the church always needs teachers – start small and develop that gift. Help out with a children’s program. Teach one session at VBS. We need men willing to prepare a message and preach at the rescue mission, we need women willing to prepare and deliver a devotion at a Grace in the Morning – the needs are there and there are a lot of people that are ready and willing to help you. I have only touched on a few of the gifts that are listed in scripture and hopefully I have made my point that we shouldn’t be thinking of gifts as a Chinese menu where we pick and choose which we will use. God has already chosen and gifted you at the perfect level with the gifts that He wants for you – and He has ordained opportunities for you to use those gifts for His glory.

My second point is that humility is at the core of our ability to exercise these gifts. Paul used the words – do not think yourself more important than you ought but think with sober judgment. This humility is rooted in the gospel. Paul just made the point a few verses earlier that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice as an act of spiritual worship. Those words spiritual worship can also be translated reasonable service - present our bodies as a living sacrifice as an act of reasonable service. Knowing that we were all hopelessly lost as sinners in a dying world, knowing that we had rejected God and rejected His truth and knowing that He crushed His Son as propitiation for our sins – it is only reasonable that we would want to humbly serve Him with grateful hearts. We talked about this at the prayer meeting on Wednesday, as blood bought heirs of heaven, as forgiven sinners, as undeserving recipients of Christ’s grace rather than God’s wrath – we should be falling on our faces humbly and with gratitude asking what we can do to glorify this God who has shown us such mercy. We should be anything but proud. Lack of humility or Pride is one thing that can quickly get in the way of using our gifts. If we start considering whether someone else “deserves” to be served in a certain way or if we start keeping score with how many times we’ve served someone or worse yet how many times we’ve been served or if we start comparing our service to other’s we have entirely missed the gospel. Thankfully God didn’t weigh my sins against someone else’s to see who was more deserving of grace – and He certainly didn’t compare what he was doing for me with what I could ever even hope to do for Him when He saved me. We are serving Christ by loving and serving the brothers and sisters here – keep Him first. It’s easy to fall into the pride trap though. I already mentioned the fact that needs within the body will often come at the worst possible time, interrupting some very important activity in my life and causing me to do things that I don’t like to do for someone who probably doesn’t appreciate it. WOW – that’s prideful not to mention selfish – but let’s be honest we have all been there. This is where renewing your mind – reminding yourself of the gospel is critically important.

Peter’s admonition to show hospitality without grumbling is a direct reminder of this need for humility as we serve. When we show hospitality we serve God. Even as we clean up the messes at the end of the event – we are to do it as unto Christ. Remember, Peter was writing to people who were starting to see persecution. They were living in a place and time where mutual ministry and serving the body would be tested – and it certainly seems that we are headed in that direction. As society lurches toward worldliness, we need to be more connected and supporting each other. Jesus warned His followers of persecution. Paul, Peter and John also added warnings of trials and tribulations. We see pastors and congregations in Canada being arrested or fined – we need to build our body now while we can to be strong in the more difficult times to come.

There is another aspect of humility that I want to consider this morning. I mentioned earlier that true humility means that we shouldn’t think more highly of ourselves but we also should not think more lowly. There are some who will fail to use their gifts and fail to serve because they think that there is someone better at it within the body. We think “oh that person is a better cook, or a better teacher” or that person is trained for counseling so I won’t step into those areas. There are a couple of problems with that. The first is that these gifts improve as they are used. The better teacher probably wasn’t better the first time that they taught. We need to use the gifts in order to improve the gifts. The second issue is that again, God assigns the gifts and the opportunities to use them. You may not be bringing a gourmet meal to someone but you can still bless them – you bless them with the effort, you bless them that they were important enough for you to make the meal or buy the meal and you bless them with a few minutes of fellowship when you drop it off. God is at work here and He is at work both in you and in the recipient. He is building the body. You may never know how God uses a quick word of encouragement or an act of mercy in someone’s life.

False humility – thinking I am nothing, I can’t do that, I am not any good at something is really a backhanded pride – it is thinking that you know better than God what you can do and that you can wait for a better, more

convenient time to serve. Think back to Paul's example of the human body. If any part of that body shuts down the entire body suffers. We are all called to a purpose by God. His perfect plan of salvation includes not only forgiveness but a purpose.

Humble service is the only kind that pleases and glorifies God. Our service is to God. Our sacrifice is in response to His ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. If we see every aspect of our service in light of the gospel then our attitude and desire to serve will be much stronger.

My third point today is that using our gifts in the way that God assigned them and in the power of the spirit will make us more like Christ. To help draw this out I want to flip over to the book of Ephesians. This letter was also written by Paul and has some striking similarities to Romans. In Ephesians, Paul spends 3 chapters on orthodoxy (right thinking), raises up a doxology of Praise – at the end of chapter 3 – “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever Amen”. This is followed by 3 chapters of orthopraxy or right living. Very similar to Romans – right thinking leads to praise of God and right living before Him.

Chapter 4 then of Ephesians starts out with Paul urging the brothers to live together in unity building up the church and using the gifts with which they are equipped. Just like Romans. Paul then gives the reason – starting in chapter 4 at verse 11 – **“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,”**

Paul tells us here that living under God's will and utilizing the gifts that He has given us will cause us to grow up in every way into Christ. We will be made more like Him. You also see there that we can avoid being children, tossed to and fro, deceived by human cunning. Paul's message in Romans is the same – be renewing your mind in Christ, discerning God's will for your life and using the gifts that he has assigned in the measure that he has assigned them is what we are to do and will lead to being Christ-like. Don't get me wrong, there will be times when we are tired and the serving seems overwhelming. There will be times when we don't feel the joy – but those are both the times when God is doing the most work in us and the times when renewing our minds in His truth are most effective. Hebrews 12:3 reminds us **“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”** Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

The rest of chapter 12 continues in this same vein. Paul continues to instruct the brothers and sisters on how to live life in light of God's amazing grace. Read the whole chapter to yourself this week – I think you will be blessed.

We've looked here today at several portions of scripture that exhort us to serve the body – serve the church out of an abundance of gratitude for Christ's work in our lives. I want to just read to you one more passage before moving to additional application as another reminder of how a right understanding of Christ's good news leads to zealous and humble service.

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

My desire here this morning is that each of us would leave here and take some time to examine ourselves. To look at our lives in how we spend our time, where we put our affections and how we serve the body. One concern that I have in preaching this message – which simply put is a call to service, a call to love the brethren here in our body at GCC – is that those who are already serving will feel somehow pressured or coerced into trying to serve more in their own strength or on the other hand that those who are not serving will fail to be convicted by the need to be involved. I certainly recognize that many here have stepped up and served Ted and Linda in many ways, the church come around the Stefanich family to support them in Dave's illness and Carol's death. Meals have gone out to Kathleen and Jasmin and others. The prayer chain at GCC is strong and active. These are

all clear indications that we have a serving church. But as Paul said to the church in Thessalonica, “we urge you brethren, excel still more” – not by working harder but by drawing closer to God.

Please, no matter where you think that you are today in terms of serving within the church, increase your time with the Lord, increase your time in prayer and increase your understanding of how he has uniquely gifted you, and the rest will sort itself out. Paul’s message is that we are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice working by the power of the spirit through our renewed minds. Not that we should just suck it up and try harder – and not that we should sit back and watch others as they serve.

We’ve already covered quite a bit of application but let me list three specific ideas.

First and foremost, we need to be renewing our minds – drawing closer to God, seeking Him in prayer and in reading His word, asking the spirit to show us God’s will for us. This can’t be done in a hurried or distracted way. It will take some time of reflection, a good deal of prayer and listening. It will likely require us to seek some advice and counsel from other brothers and sisters who know us and can speak truth into our lives. Most of us spend a good deal more time in “non-Christian” settings than we do in Christian settings. Most of us have workplaces, schools, family situations or activities that would have to be categorized as worldly or secular rather than church based. So we need to work a little harder to make sure that we are engaging other believers.

Second consider how you can use the gifts that God has given you. Think of the things that you like to do, the things that people say you do well (which may or may not be the same things you like by the way) and ask others in the church what they see as your spiritual gifts. Pray about what the Lord is showing you. Then consider the opportunities God is placing before you. There are many opportunities to serve here at GCC. There are both organized and ad-hoc places where your time, gifts, and desire to serve would be greatly appreciated. Some of the needs are communicated – Jane sent an email yesterday with 2 opportunities to serve, one in the area of greeting and the other in organizing events, we always need teachers in Children’s Church, workers for the plant sale and meals for a brother or sister who is not well. Some needs may become evident to you through participation in the various ministries. If you are a regular at women’s events, you may be asked to host a Grace in the morning or lead a discussion group. Often, the needs are not announced or even made evident. There are a lot of brothers and sisters who are quietly lonely or in need of encouragement who won’t broadcast a plea. Exhorting a brother or sister in hard times, listening and counseling with someone who has a hard decision to make, offering childcare to a harried mom or just calling to check in on someone you haven’t seen for a while all use spiritual gifts and serve to build the body of Christ in tremendous ways. I can’t emphasize this enough – and I will be honest in admitting that I am not at all good at this. The body exists through connections – it thrives when all of the parts are in synch – it doesn’t take much skill to make some calls or pop in for a visit. Many of the more visible opportunities to serve come once a month or once a year but there are numerous less visible ways that come every day. Don’t get fooled into thinking that you need to take on some big project – start small and serve. If you don’t see the needs, please ask.

Finally, be intentional. By that I mean don’t let circumstances or external pressures or worldly momentum determine how you use your time and energy. I think that too often we think of our lives as static or rooted – but the truth is we are moving in a direction – we should be thoughtful about what that direction is. I mentioned earlier that we are called to be growing up into Christ which implies change, movement. We are not static beings and we need to be sure that the direction we move is toward Christ. Some of us are older but we are still changing – still growing. A helpful exercise that is often used in the corporate world but you can use for yourself or your family would be to sit down and make a list of 3 things in your life that you want to be sure that you keep doing, 3 things that you would like to start doing and 3 things that you would like to stop doing. It is a helpful way to step back and look at our lives and assess where they are headed. What are 3 things that you are currently doing that you believe are part of the gifting that God has given you. What are 3 gifts that you are not currently using to the extent that you should. Finally, what are 3 things that you are doing that don’t seem to be aligned with God’s call on your life. Find those 3 things to stop so that you have time for the 3 things to start. Doing this once or twice a year or so will help you make sure that you are growing and that you are growing toward Christ.

It is critically important that you not leave here just asking “how can I serve” (although we do want you to ask that) – we need to first be asking “how can I be transformed by the renewing of my mind in Christ?” How can I better take to heart all of the things that Paul recounted in the first 11 chapters so that I serve out of an outflow of thanks. Abide in Him first so that the service just comes naturally. Let me close by just reminding you – there are no spectators in the church, there are no unimportant parts of the body. God has gifted and called each of you to a purpose. Seek Him and pray that you will find it. Start small and build – but most importantly start.