

Sacrificial Living and the Gospel of Christ

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. One of the common questions that I get is, what is God's will?

Well, today I want to tell you, what is God's will for you? Yes, for next week, for next year, for the rest of your life, what is God's will for you?

I want to tell you because Paul is telling you in scripture. But what do you think about when I say what is God's will for you? Do you start to think, well, should I go out to be a missionary like Paul? Should I change jobs? Should I buy that holiday home in Phillip Island? Is it time for me to change financial advisors?

Is that what God's will is concerned about? When I ask you the question, what is God's will for you? What did you think of? Did you think of what should I do?

[1 : 08] What should I stop? What should I give? Where should I go? Where should I study? Well, maybe you didn't think of that one, but maybe you should have. Who should I spend time with?

Was it all about what I should do or not do, say or not say? Or was it about us as a people?

It's an ambiguous question, isn't it? What is God's will for you? Is it asking for what each one of us should do as individuals? Or is it asking for what we should do as a group?

When Paul says, so that you may discern what is the will of God, it's so easy for us to read that as if Paul was going to tell us what God's will is for each one of us as individuals.

But as often when you find that phrase, the will of God in Scripture, it's talking about what God's will is for us as a people.

[2 : 13] What God's will is for all his people. What God's will is for his church here at Doncaster. It's not just about what I should do, but that what we should do as God's people.

Our passage today actually answers that bigger question, what is God's will for you? You, the church at Doncaster, you, part of the people of God.

I might like to say, I could answer the question by saying, God's will for you is for you to give generously to the Ridley Centenary Appeal, come on an Israel study tour that we're planning next year, or even yourself study at Ridley.

I might like to say that, and you could certainly do worse than that. But our passage has a much bigger horizon than that. It's talking about what God's will is for us as a people, for us as a people of God.

And indeed, God's will for us is described in verse 2 as good and acceptable and perfect. So what should we be doing that would make it good and acceptable and perfect in God's sight?

[3 : 34] And that's not a bad aim to have, is it? As we seek to serve God and honour Him. What is the will of God for us? Well, in order to understand it, we've got to read from the very beginning.

Chapter 12, verse 1 tells us, I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters. It's only one word, therefore, isn't it? I remember early on in my life as a Christian, people saying, whenever you come across the word therefore in Scripture, you must always ask, what therefore is therefore?

Why is he saying therefore? What's he building on before this passage? And we see that chapters 1 to 11 of Romans have outlined much about God's plan and purpose for His world.

It's outlined that God is the Creator who owns this world and yet people have rebelled against Him. It's seen how God has solved that problem of our rebellion by the free gift of His only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Through His death on our behalf, He's dealt with the problem of sin once and for all and gives us new direction and purpose in life.

[4 : 54] We've seen how in Romans chapter 9 to 11, the Jew and Gentile are united in Christ as the people of God and old divisions are overcome in Christ.

It's a way of describing how God has turned life upside down because of the gift of the Lord Jesus and His sin-bearing death on the cross.

Therefore, I appeal to you, therefore, because of all that, all that He said about what God has done in His free and gracious gift, the Lord Jesus. He fills it out there in verse 1 where He says, I appeal to you, therefore, by the mercies of God.

That's what He means by that phrase, the mercies of God, how God has mercifully dealt with His people. In verse 3, He also mentions, by the grace of God given to me, and that may be a reference to it as well.

In the light of all that, in the light of all that God has done which Paul has canvassed and which would pay good study. We do offer courses on Romans, I should say, at Ridley.

[6 : 03] In the light of all that, we see that God wants us to be able to discern what is the will of God.

He says, in the light of all that, present your bodies as a living sacrifice. We're used to that phrase as we leave church and the communion service, at the end of the Anglican communion service. We offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice. It's certainly better than the alternative. I mean, it's nice, better to be living than not to be living, isn't it? But if we thought about the implications of those words, or do they just snip off our tongue?

A sacrifice is something offered wholeheartedly, entirely to God, to be at God's disposal, to do with however God wishes. That's what we're offering ourselves up with our lives, with our time, with our money, with our energy, with our family, with our friendship networks.

A living sacrifice that we offer ourselves entirely to God. Paul's not going to be giving us an answer about what we should be doing with our money next week. He wants to know what we're going to be doing with all of who we are and what we have and what we will be so that it's good and acceptable and perfect.

[7 : 34] And he says, this is your spiritual worship. You can translate that in a number of different ways. It could be translated as, this is the only reasonable thing to do.

This is the only proper response to all of God's mercies climaxed in Christ. So that we, you may be able to discern what is the will of God.

So in order to understand the will of God, what do we have to do? We have to present our bodies, our whole selves, to God as a living sacrifice. The only reasonable thing to do, our spiritual worship. And it's then we have to do one positive thing and one negative thing. The negative thing first.

Verse 2, do not be conformed to this world. Matthew's already introduced that concept to us.

That's the good thing about a kid's talk, isn't it? I often find the adults learn a lot more from the kid's talk than from the sermon. Do not let the world squeeze you into its mould was one translation by David Phillips.

[8 : 41] Don't be conformed to the world and worldliness. One of the things that I think Holy Trinity has done well is that they've worked hard at cross-cultural communication.

The diversity of people here and at the different services, the beginning of the Chinese congregations here have been a terrific witness to the fact that the Christian message is not just for one kind of person but for all of God's people.

There's a need to think through different ways and the different kinds of services you have here at Holy Trinity show that you're trying to reach out to a variety of people.

Different people, some people who like something more traditional, some people who like something more contemporary and of course 10 o'clock where you're in between where you like something traditional, something contemporary, something alive and something unexpected as well.

We need to think through what does the world say about how we live and what does God's word say. The first thing is to not simply adopt something because the world says it.

[9 : 53] Don't be conformed to the world. If you want to find out the will of God, it won't just be imitating everyone else in the world but it'll be doing something different and that comes in the second part of verse 2.

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed. Not conformed but transformed.

Transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may be able to discern what is the will of God.

Now what is being transformed by the renewal of our mind? Now it's true that some of us from time to time wouldn't mind trading in our mind for a new mind. I don't think it's just talking about that. It's not talking about being clever or remembering things that we used to remember but have now forgotten. It's not just talking about the ability to do cryptic crosswords or to beat Paul Barker at Scrabble.

It's not talking about those kind of things. It's talking about changing the way we think. Changing the way we discern God's will and purposes.

[10:57] The mind is of course the centre of our thinking. We know that but it's much more than that in the Bible. It's the centre of our being. Core of our being really. The centre of our willing. The centre of our choosing.

The direction we take in life. All that has to be renewed. Not just trimmed off a little bit. Not trimmed around the edges. But made new from the inside out.

Sometimes people think that becoming a Christian means becoming slightly nicer than you used to be. Well, I hope when you become a Christian you are slightly nicer than you used to be.

Some people are pretty nice before they become a Christian. There are certain things you don't do now that you're a Christian that you may have used to do beforehand. Things you don't say.

Things you don't value now that you used to. But being a Christian is not just about making you look a bit prettier a bit tidier around the edges. It's about changing you from the inside out.

[12:01] C.S. Lewis used to use the example of going to the dentist. Is Fiona here today? Can't see her. Good. Good. You have a toothache.

You know there's something wrong and you know that you can't fix it on your own. You try for a little while. You brush, floss, do all those kind of things. It's not going away. No. This is something more significant than this.

I have to get this problem fixed. Do you go to the dentist straight away? Most of us tend to put it off for a little while, don't we? Hoping that it might fix up itself.

And why do we do that? Because we know when we go to the dentist, what are they going to do? Yes, they'll fix up the presenting problem, but they won't stop there, will they?

Once they've got you in that chair, you're theirs. So they'll check all the other teeth. They'll probably go for a few x-rays and then they'll go clean around and they'll dig and they'll prod here and poke here.

[13:06] And you see the dollar signs just ring up and up and up and up. And then I think the worst thing they do, they send you to the dental hygienist. I'm sorry to anyone who's a dental hygienist.

I think that's cruel and inhuman punishment going to a dental hygienist where they just seem to delight in making life difficult for you. Well, at least that's my perception of it. But you can see what happens when you go to a dentist.

You don't just get the presenting problem fixed up. When you come to Christ, you don't just get that particular issue that you're struggling with fixed up. If you wanted to become a Christian because you thought that you would find more friends there, God doesn't stop there.

God wants to clean up our whole lives to make us brand new people. That's what's involved in the renewal of your mind at the very centre of who we are.

God wants to change it and make us brand new people. Some of the changes we understand. Some of the changes we're really glad about.

[14:10] But others are a bit costly, a bit unexpected and sometimes a bit uncomfortable. But that's what God wants us to do. This is the will of God for you.

That God wants us as a people to be a brand new people with brand new values, brand new goals that are based on what God has done for us in Christ.

But it does involve a new way of thinking about the world, a new way of thinking about God, a new way of thinking about ourselves and that's sometimes counterintuitive.

It requires hard work. We need to read our Bible to understand the mind of God. And of course that's why a college like Ridley has been brought into being so people can be trained to know their Bible well and to be shaped for ministry so that they can go on and teach God's Word and train others.

if we take seriously the renewal of our mind, the renewal of who we are and if that has to affect all the church then we have to have well trained people.

[15 : 30] We do have to have outstanding students like John O. Smith and a few others as well. It's important for us.

It's important for the life of the church. As I said I've been at Ridley now for 20 years and one of the reasons I stay there is not because I couldn't find something else to do but because I'm thoroughly committed to the importance of theological education and colleges like Ridley in strategically shaping the future life of this diocese and indeed beyond.

There's nothing more important. So can I encourage you if you are thinking about what you want to do with your life individually that you think about where your purposes fit within God's larger purposes to renew the mind the heart of his people and to bring people align people with God's values and purposes.

That's not an end in itself we see. We are to discern what is the will of God what is good and acceptable and perfect but Paul's exhortation doesn't finish there.

It goes on to verses 3-8 and there Paul talks about the kind of people we are and how we exercise the gifts that God has given us.

[16 : 58] really this section is about being formed or shaped. If in verse 2 we're told do not be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds now we're being told to be formed.

If I can continue that formation metaphor what we try to do at really is not just to give people information but we try to give people informed formation.

Not just information but informed formation. That is we want to inform people of the truths of God's word so that God's word and God's spirit can shape God's people for God's ministry in God's world.

And I hope we do it in as God sent it away as that. We want to form and shape people. And two aspects of the shaping that God wants for his people part of the will of God are outlined here.

Look at verse 3 when we see that we have to have our character shaped. By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment each according to the measure of faith that God has a sign.

[18 : 27] We are to have not an inflated view of ourselves but a right understanding of ourselves and our role in God's purposes. This is the important part of it that we see ourselves as God sees us not as a worm or a maggot as has been the case sometimes in the Christian past God's but as people made in God's image and renewed in the likeness of God by what God has done for us in Christ and people who in Paul's words elsewhere are being transformed more and more into the likeness of the Lord Jesus.

That's how we're to see ourselves but not super smart, super intelligent, terrific singers. It may be that we have all of those things but that's not what makes us of value in God's sight.

It's what God has done for us in Christ. God may delight in those things as well but we ought to see ourselves not with an inflated view of who we are but because of who or what God has done for us. It's not just the people you see out front that are important in God's purposes. In my local church I deliberately go on a number of rosters that aren't out front rosters.

I work in the data projector. Now that's as back room as you can get right up the back there where no one sees what you're doing. They see when you stuff things up but no one sees what you're doing but I do that deliberately.

[20 : 02] I've been on morning tea rosters. I've been on sides at the door handing out pamphlets because I want to say that I'm not just here to preach and teach and lead God's people but I'm here to serve.

That's an important part. It's not that we move beyond that and when you get to be up front you don't have to do the menial things. That's not how God thinks. We'll see in the moment how God has given different kind of gifts to different people and God wants us to use our own particular gifts for the sake of building up the body no matter what those gifts are.

the issue is faithfulness in using the gifts because we're of value to God because of what God has done for us in Christ.

So how is the will of God applied to God's people? As we are first of all transformed. He gives an example of that not to think more highly than we ought of ourselves but our character must be shaped by God.

God we cannot be the people we used to be. We must be made brand new on the inside out and whatever is unseemly or unhelpful or which hinders other people coming to see Christ must be

removed from our lives from who we are.

[21 : 24] And the second thing is that we must use our gifts the gifts that God has given us. Remember that we are in one body for as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function so we who are many are one body in Christ and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us prophecy and according in proportion to faith ministry and ministering the teacher in teaching the exhorter in exhortation the giver in generosity the leader in diligence the compassionate in cheerfulness.

That's not an exhaustive list of the gifts that God has given to his people. But God does tell us that the spirit will give each one of us gifts to be used not for our own pleasure not even for our own benefit but for the sake of the body for the sake of others.

You see how countercultural is Paul's thinking here. You don't get given things so that you can boast or say what a terrific person I am but you get given opportunities to serve for the sake of your fellow believers people for whom Christ died.

So we have to at Ridley train people not only in their character and that's a difficult part of training people for ministry in a sense it's easy to train people in giving them information it's easy to develop their spiritual gifts but we have to train them in character as well and then we have to grow in them the ability to use the gifts that God has given to them for the sake of the church.

[23 : 12] We have to encourage them to discern what their particular giftedness is so that they'll be placed in positions in the church where they'll be able to use what God has given to them for the sake of others.

But this passage will transform many of our habits and expectations. It challenges our independence as so much a part of our culture.

It challenges our autonomy. I've been interested in listening to some of the post-race interviews of the athletes of the Commonwealth Games.

It's interesting how many of them talk about how important it is that they achieved their own goals. I knew I could do it and I lived up to my potential. And I thought, yes, at one level that's true, isn't it? These people have done really well. They've trained very hard. They've made this the goal of their life. But it's so self-focused. It's all about them.

[24 : 19] And I thought, in God's economy, there's no such thing as individual gold medals. It's all a team event. We're in it as the people of God. And we have to make sure that like a team event, we pass on the baton to those behind.

That's why we need to be concerned not just about why church can suit us, or the way our services run helps us to have our needs met.

We need to be committed to the next generation. The children who've gone out to their activities, we need to train them up in true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have to think about the people not on this side of the glass only, but the people on the other side of the glass. The people are not yet here who are going to be brought into God's kingdom, some through this church and some through many other ministries.

And we have to work out how can we be church in such a way as we'll reach out to them and incorporate them into the life of God's people as we grow and develop the gifts that God has given to us.

[25 : 28] You see, God's mercy upends our values. What God has done for us in Christ upends our goals. And of course, and most particularly in this passage, it upends our understanding of what is the will of God.

It's easy sometimes to become self absorbed about what is the will of God for me. Is it that I form this relationship or change this job or even move in this new area of ministry?

Or is it about what God is doing for his people? This prior question of not being conformed to the world, that's the will of God, of being transformed by the renewal of our minds, that's the will of God, and of being formed in our character and growing in our spiritual gifts.

That's the will of God. I said at the beginning I'd tell you what the will of God for you was. Very simple. Paul's made it clear I didn't have to do any clever thinking at all.

I just had to read the Bible. For the will of God is very simple. Don't be conformed to the world, be transformed by the renewal of your mind, and be formed in your character and in your spiritual giftedness.

[26 : 53] That's the will of God for you, for all God's people, forever. Amen.