God's Dream for Our Lives

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Romans 12:1-15

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. 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. 3 For 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 judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. 9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

1. The Protestant Reformation

This Tuesday on October 31, 2017, we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a German priest and professor of theology at University of Wittenburg, sparked the Protestant Reformation. The 33-year-old Martin Luther wrote to his bishop, Albrecht von Brandenburg, protesting the pope's sale of indulgences. He enclosed in his letter a copy of his Ninety-Five Theses.

In Thesis 86, Luther asks, "Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?" At the time, a Dominican priest named Johann Tetzel, commissioned by the Archbishop of Mainz and Pope Leo X, was in the midst of a major fundraising campaign in Germany to finance the renovation of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther objected to Johann Tetzel's saying, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory (also attested as 'into heaven') springs."

According to one account, Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg on October 31, 1517. The Theses were

written in Latin, and his revolutionary ideas began to spread quickly. Within two weeks, copies of his theses had spread throughout Germany; within two months, they had spread throughout Europe. In 1521, Luther was summoned before the Diet of Worms and excommunicated by the Pope. And he was condemned as an outlaw by the Emperor. Protected by Prince Frederick, Luther began working on a German translation of the Bible, a task that took 10 years to complete. By the time Luther died in 1546, his revolutionary beliefs had formed the basis for the Protestant Reformation. As a Protestant Christian, I admire Luther's bold courage and praise his revolutionary lifestyle. As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, I would like to ask one question, "Do we need another reformation?" I believe today's scripture gives us an answer.

2. Transformation by Renewal

In Romans 12:1, Paul says to the Romans, "***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***." In the first 11 chapters of Romans, Paul describes how God's mercy is revealed to His people. For Martin Luther, the core of God's mercy is found in Romans 1:16-17. ***"It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*** [17]***For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'"***

Based on this passage, Luther emphasized *sola fide* which means "faith alone" in Latin. It is also known as justification by faith alone. Paul emphasizes here that our salvation is not earned by our good deeds but given by God's love and mercy. This theological understanding is one of the most important truths for the Protestant Reformation.

What does Paul mean when he says, "***Present your bodies as a living sacrifice***" (12:1)? I like the Message Bible translation: "***Take your everyday, ordinary life-your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life-and place it before God as an offering***." In verse 2, Paul says, "***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***." Offering our bodies as living sacrifices means to lay aside our own wants, and follow God's will, giving all our energy and resources up to God to be used at His disposal and trusting God to guide us.

Instead of embracing today's culture without thinking, Paul encourages the Romans and us to fix our attention on God. Paul explains that then we will be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Transformation, from the Christian perspective, is a total change from the inside out. It's through this change that

we become more like Jesus. Paul shares that transformation happens when our minds are renewed.

How does the renewal of our minds happen? It is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:5 says, "***Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires***." When we are transformed by the Holy Spirit, we are able to discern and understand the will of God. And when we discern the will of God, we often see that the direction of life's journey changes immensely as we begin to follow the leading of God through Christ.

3. God's Plan for Paul and Us

We see an example of this during Paul's second missionary journey. When Paul and his friends went through Phrygia and Galatia, the Holy Spirit would not let them preach in Asia. So they went to Troas. In Paul's dream, Paul saw a man from Macedonia begging him to come over to Macedonia and to help him. Paul interpreted this as a vision that God had called them to preach the good news to the people there. Paul and his friends sailed straight from Troas to the district of Macedonia where Lydia and her family were baptized. And the good news of Jesus Christ had spread throughout Europe. Although it wasn't in his plan, Paul continued to live his life according to God's dream.

What is God's dream for you and me? I believe God's dream for us is to live a life as part of the community of faith. Romans 12:4 and the following talks about Christian living. Paul uses the concept of the human body to teach how we should live and work together. As the parts of the human body function under the direction of the brain, Christians are supposed to work together under the command of Jesus Christ. And God gives us different gifts so we can build up his church.

Our role is to be faithful as we serve others with what God has given us. No one is discriminated, looked down upon, rejected, or refused. Everyone is welcomed by the same God that welcomes us all into His presence. My favorite verse is 15: "***Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep***." I have seen this recently and am so encouraged by everyone who has been helping Joanie Cahoon as she goes through her medical treatments. I am sure she experiences the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ through those who help her.

4. The Open House

I was also encouraged by our open house last Sunday. We practiced opening our hearts, minds, and our doors to the people around us. Many people today understand the church as a building. We might think that the stone building is Swift Memorial Church. But this is not a biblical understanding of the

church. The word “church” comes from the Greek word “*ekklesia*” which means “called-out ones.” The church is beyond just the physical building, the real meaning of “church” is the gathering of God’s people. Ephesians 1:22-23 says, ***“And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church,*** [23] ***which is his body.”*** The body of Christ is made up of all believers in Jesus. So when people come to church, they learn and experience who God is and who Jesus is. The church is a gathering that people can experience the love of God and the grace of Jesus. This is meant to be an experience not only for Sundays, but for each and every person every day of our lives wherever we are in the world.

5. Conclusion

Luther sparked a renewal of Christianity 500 years ago. Even though Luther brought about revolutionary change in the world, his revolutionary challenge is not finished yet. At the beginning of my message, I raised a question: do we need another reformation? What is your answer? My answer is yes. I think every generation needs its Martin Luthers. But the next reformation will be different from the last. The next reformation will happen when millions of reformers live compassionately, creatively, and courageously together for God’s dream and vision in this world.

How do such reformations happen? Reformations like this happen when Christians turn and listen to God every day and pursue God’s will and try to fulfill His dream together. This happens when we are filled and renewed each day by the power of the Holy Spirit. When we are filled by the Holy Spirit, we will never be shaken and discouraged in any circumstances.

6. Application

During my trip to Russia, I learned that the law of religion has been making it difficult for missionaries to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. About twenty years ago, they were able to distribute the Bible on the street. But it is not allowed today. However, the missionaries are not discouraged. They still believe that God loves Russia and will allow a revival in Russia sooner or later.

Theology professor Thaddeus Williams has said, “The biggest problem in the church today is that many of us have too small a view of who God is. We have shrunk an infinite being. We have diminished His glory and put Him into very small and manageable boxes.” I am so saddened to notice that today our worldview is not God-centered, but man-centered. The influence of the church is very minimal. However, I still believe that the community of faith is one where people can experience the almighty God and see the living Christ in the world. God’s dream for our lives is to become a channel of God’s blessing. May God use us and Swift Memorial Church to give hope and happiness in the world. Amen.