



Chuck Orwiler

“Community” is trending these days. Perhaps it is because people long to feel connected. That seems good. Nevertheless, that limited view of community falls short of the stunning intent God has for his people as described in Romans 12. God’s intent is for communities of faith to be living laboratories of the will of God in which love of God and neighbor are visible and proven viable. I want to remember the community of which God speaks is nothing less than sacred—set apart for holy purposes.

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BIBLE READING: Romans 11:32—12:2

God intends for his will to be known. The will of God is accessible, practical, testable, and delightfully good. The apostle Paul described quite particularly how to gain the knowledge of God's will.

He begins by reverently praising God for the marvelous way in which his mercy is revealed, and intended for those who live *contrary* to his will and way. Wait. What is God thinking? Such an inverted strategy of redemption defies comprehension. Indeed, who can know the mind of the Lord (v. 34)? If the mind of God is beyond the grasp of mere mortals, how then can we possibly know the will of God? We grasp what we can know, and that begins with knowing God's mercy. Knowing his mercy brings us before our Lord on our knees and we say, I am yours. We are yours.

The will of God Almighty streams through humanity, across history, and throughout creation. God's will is there for us, but not waiting for us. That is, God's will is not turned on and off at our points of need or states of being. Instead, and incredibly, we are invited to wade into the divine stream. Our timid step into that stream is always one of humble surrender to the Lord of all. We take off our shoes because this is holy wading. Beginning with the oldest writing in the Bible we are explicitly counseled in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Micah, and now Romans that we begin to engage the will of God in humble reverence.

Are we smart enough to know the mind of God? No, we are not. Are we humble enough to know the will of God? There's the question.

SONG: May the Mind of Christ My Savior

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Merciful Lord, I am yours.
Merciful Savior, we are yours.*

—Chuck Orwiler

BIBLE READING: Romans 12:3-5

Surrendered to our Lord, as per verses 1-2, we are enrolled as trainees of the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. Eagerly attentive, we await the disclosure of The Great Mystery (God's will). Our first lesson was to humble ourselves before God. Our second is like unto it. We are to humble ourselves before our community of faith. To begin to comprehend the will of God I need to lay aside my expectations for a special message just for me. Instead, I am to embrace the expectation that God has a revelation *for us* to be revealed *in us*.

As the body of Christ we belong to each other. Romans 12, indeed all of the book of Romans, conveys this singular understanding: in Christ, we belong to each other. In Romans Paul describes the good news of God's salvation to a Gentile readership who have little knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). In doing so he describes how the stream of God's will flows through a people whether it be Israel, a secular society, humanity, or the body of Christ.

Entering the will of God is founded on two acts of surrender. First, we yield ourselves to our merciful Savior. We are living sacrifices whose credo is, "not my will, but yours be done." Given that, our Lord's next instruction in knowing his will—his good, pleasing, and perfect will—is this: surrender yourselves to Christ's body. Surrender yourselves to each other.

We surrender to each other and the Great Mystery is revealed *in us*. We will see it.

SONG: If We Are the Body

PRAYER SUGGESTION: I pray Lord, that you will open my understanding, our understanding, that you intend for us to be a people of God.

—Chuck Orwiler

BIBLE READING: Romans 12:5-8, 11

In verse 3 Paul left us with the confident hope of grasping God's good and wonderful will. The balance of this chapter addresses in detail how to do just that. A group of believers sincere in knowing the will of God would do well to just live this single chapter verse by verse.

Today's verses describe how God reveals his delightful intent by orchestrating a wonderful array of motivating gifts among individual believers. The will of God emerges as we serve in response to this divine gifting. In pursuit of God's will I lay aside my expectations of a special delivery just for me. Instead, we embrace the expectation that God's intentions will be revealed in us. In the process our Lord is faithful in addressing our personal needs as we find our preoccupation shifting from our will to his.

A clearness meeting was gathered to help me discern God's direction in my ministry in our church community. I was questioning whether my gifting was congruent with that of the congregation. A member of the meeting shared that God's will is like a puzzle and we are each a piece. He observed that I was trying to figure out the final resolution of the puzzle and where my piece fit in. He suggested that instead I might consider that as we exercise our gifting our puzzle pieces take shape, and that may be enough. His kind counsel was one of trusting God. Trusting God by being faithful to exercise the gifts he gives us. Trusting God to assemble a lovely expression of his will.

SONG: All to Jesus I Surrender [I Surrender All]

PRAYER SUGGESTION: I offer myself as a living sacrifice to you, O Lord. I offer the gifts you have given me to the body of Christ.

—Chuck Orwiler

BIBLE READING: Romans 12:9a, 10

The subject at hand is the sacred community. It is sacred because God's good, pleasing, and perfect will is revealed among these people. It is a community because *together* they manifest the reality of Christ. They are the body of Christ.

This is so remarkable. How can it be? What arduous regimen must be endured to achieve such a blessed end? The way to enfleshing Christ in us is neither hard to understand nor available only for the exceptional. Paul details how the kingdom of God comes to earth among people just like us. Our English translations give us small words and short sentences. The gist is not complicated.

*Actually love people. In fact, love loving people.
More particularly, habitually honor others above
yourselves.*

A couple relatively new to our congregation surprised me when they said, "We've not been in a church like this before. People are accepted just for who they are." Unfortunately, that has not been everyone's experience among us. The point, however, is that when we actually love people, it "works." The kingdom of God comes to earth at exactly that point.

Honestly, how much training do we need to understand these directives? The way is simple. The rub is simply doing it. It looks like we really will have to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Now what?

Let's take small bites and chew slowly. Could there be little groups of believers—two, three, perhaps more—who would take Romans 12 a verse at a time and commit to each other to simply do what it says?

SONG: They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, may you give us the grace to follow the plain directives of Romans 12.

—Chuck Orwiler

BIBLE READING: Romans 12:12

Close your eyes and bask in this image: a congregation—your congregation—joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. That sounds like an oasis. It sounds like trees planted by streams of water. It sounds like an easy yoke in which one would find rest for one's soul.

Of course, only the large churches can afford that kind of thing. Most churches don't have the facilities, or the budget, or the critical mass of people to pull off being joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. Furthermore, are we talking contemporary or traditional?

Yes, we are.

It is helpful to remember those to whom Paul wrote. They were small bands of believers meeting in homes. The inherent uncertainty of their times was compounded by their counter-cultural dedication to Christ. To these people Paul declared that God's will for them was to be joyful in the hope that transcends life itself. To the afflicted Paul does not offer God's reason for their affliction. He does know, however, that God works all for the good for those who love the Lord and are called to his purpose (8:28). Hence, they are to be patient in affliction. Finally, they are to be a people of prayer. Prayer is a universal expression of trust in God who is present and cares.

This is what God's good will emerging in a people of faith looks like. These are the manifestations of actually relying upon our Lord. These are indicators of the viability of our personal and corporate faith.

SONG: We Will Not Be Shaken

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, please teach me about my response to uncertainty and affliction, and my practice of prayer. Thank you.

—Chuck Orwiler

BIBLE READING: Romans 12:14-16

There is limited joy for skilled orchestra musicians solely in personal excellence. They yearn for rehearsals to begin because they will finally get to hear and experience the composition as it can only sound with full instrumentation playing harmoniously.

Those of us with even a little experience in music learned the difference between playing at the same time and playing harmoniously. To play harmoniously musicians attend to their own part—while listening to those on either side, while listening to the orchestra as a whole, while following the conductor. Consequently, moment by moment, there are countless little exercises of give and take between musicians to result in the best sound possible. The conductor gives direction. However no one but the musicians can exercise this constant attentiveness to one another that makes beautiful music.

Harmony of life is the will of God. Therefore, it is characteristic of the people of God. Being the people of God means living out what it means to love God and neighbor, and to do so together. It is an act of mutual submission to one another and to our Lord. Being a community of God's love often makes it into our church brochures or doctrinal statements. We all know it is God's intent. Everyone can exercise the constant attentiveness to one another that is required. It comes about moment by moment in the give and take of real life. And when we do so, it is good and pleasing and perfect. It is a sweet, sweet harmony. It is the will of God, and we are in it.

SONG: We Are God's People

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Please forgive me, Lord, for resisting cooperating with a particular person or situation. Here is what I will do differently.

—Chuck Orwiler

BIBLE READING: Romans 12:14, 17-21

Of course there is the proverbial fly in the ointment. We can talk about the sweet harmony of a loving community of faith, but what about when so-and-so does such-and-such? Sometimes when that happens, “all hell breaks loose.” This particular colloquialism is worth serious consideration for a couple of reasons. First, it is a vivid picture. Hopefully, we have not witnessed a full manifestation. Nevertheless, we have seen enough to cringe at the possibilities. It is a sobering reality pleading for a better way.

The same phrase suggests a better way in light of its opposite. What if, after the fly sullied the ointment, all heaven broke loose? Isn't that precisely what Paul is inviting us into? He is not pretending the sacred community is untainted. On the contrary, we can count on taint. Meanwhile, the expectation of overcoming evil with good barely exists in our society, and a largely undeveloped intent colors our faith communities.

Why not take these verses at face value? What if we were committed to bless those who make our lives miserable rather than curse them, live at peace with everyone at least as far as it depends on us, give up on revenge altogether, and in various practical ways respond to intended evil with intended good?

What if we understood our communities of faith to be laboratories of God's will publicly testing its viability? A group of Jesus' followers could agree to test and approve the will of God. They could make a pact to offer themselves as living sacrifices by attempting to live together each tenet of Romans 12.

How can we not?

SONG: Let Your Heart Be Broken

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Honestly, Lord, I do, or do not, want to do this. I believe. Please help my unbelief.

—Chuck Orwiler