### “What Is Good and Perfect” Steve Finlan for The First Church, August 27, 2023

**Romans 12:1–8**

1I 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. 2Do 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. . .

4As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**Matthew 16:13–20**

13Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. . .” 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

I’m going to talk about believers, what happens with believers, and about Jesus, and who we think he is. We start with one of the most vivid and important passages about believers in the Bible. Paul uses terminology, “spiritual worship” (12:1), which commonly means worship that emphasizes concepts and not things, ideas and not rituals. Then he 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” (12:2). This transformation seems to be God’s long-term project with human beings. Its purpose is not for human aggrandizement, but for harmonization with and fulfillment of God’s will. And he finishes that sentence with some words that he makes synonymous with “will of God,” and that’s “what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2).

So there are certain concepts and ideals that amount to spiritual worship, and which help us in letting ourselves be transformed (the Greek word is *metamorphoō*) and enabled to fulfill the will of God, which is everything good and perfect. “Perfect” has a double meaning in Greek, besides its usual meaning of the ideal and best form of something, it also means that which is mature. So Paul is saying that we believers can allow God to make us mature and spiritual. In fact, salvation is a process of being transformed into a more spiritual person. It is a never-ending process. In his last letter, Philippians, Paul says he has not reached his goal, but he is “straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind” (Phil 3:13–15).

Paul then gets specific about what this looks like in a congregation. We will have diverse gifts: prophecy, ministry, teaching, giving, cheering up (12:6–8). These activities are beneficial to others. If we are doing God’s will, we will be focused on loving service to others. All our gifts are meant for the lifting up of the fellowship.

You know that the idea of being a team player is highly valued. Bill Russell was not the highest scoring center during his basketball career, but he was a great team player and defender, had the second most rebounds per game of all time, and the whole Celtics team worked like a well-oiled machine, winning eight consecutive NBA championships, and eleven total championships in the 50s and 60s. Coach Don Nelson said there are two kinds of player, one makes himself look good in comparison with the players around him, and one makes the players around him look better than they are, and Russell was of the second type. After his playing career, he helped convince Shaquille O’Neal to bury the hatchet with Kobe Bryant (Wikipedia). Russell was a team player who helped others.

Let us switch to the gospel reading. Jesus has been teaching the idea of loving service to the apostles, and embodying it in his own deeds. Now he asks them who they think he is, and Peter is ready with an answer. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). Jesus affirms the answer and insists that the Father put this truthful answer in Peter’s mind. It is on this fact, the divine Sonship of the Messiah, that Jesus will build his church. But because of the political alarm that this idea would raise, he tells them to keep it to themselves. “Messiah” sounds political, and “Son of God” sounds blasphemous, so he wants them to keep those ideas to themselves for a while.

It was not God’s will that Jesus’ mission should be derailed right at its beginning, or that it be surrounded by more controversy than was inevitable. It was (evidently) God’s will that he be able to have his public mission for three or four years before the inevitable opposition gathered enough steam to actively move against him. Aggressively pushing “Messiah” or “Son of God” would have brought about repression sooner.

Jesus was aware that the claims he made, at least in private to his apostles, were astounding and world shattering claims. He didn’t want his public message to be primarily about himself, but about fellowship with God, so he continued to preach such fellowship and to avoid the question of Messiahship and divine Sonship. After the Resurrection would be the appropriate time to announce Jesus’ divine status.

*Then* the three apostles of the inner circle could make known what they saw at the Transfiguration. Then the eleven apostles could share what Jesus said shortly before the end, and which is recorded in the Gospel of John. Then Peter could share what he had said, and what Jesus responded, at Caesarea Philippi. Then it was perfectly alright to let the believer community know that Jesus is the Son of God. Some part of Jesus’ message does have to do with himself, even though *he* put the main emphasis on the Father, and believers having faith in the Father. We also get to know, in Colossians, about Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), and, in John, that he is the one who reveals the Father to us (John 14:9).

The 20th century preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote a sermon in which he switched the focus to “Who Do You Think You Are?” He spoke about the amazing confidence that the New Testament has in human beings, certainly beyond what we usually have today. He said it is easier to believe the New Testament teaching about God than its teaching about humanity. For it talks about believers becoming glorious, being spiritually transformed, being children of God, able to discern the will of God, capable of loving and forgiving. What it says about human beings forces us to question the generally cynical and despairing concept of humanity that we have developed over the last hundred years or so.

But there are inspiring stories that counteract this cynicism. A female student took a vacation to Ottawa and was travelling home on a train. Some French-speaking boys were chatting behind her, and at one stop they got off and one of the boys handed her a folded napkin. Used to be being hit on, the student just smiled non-committally. Later, she almost threw the napkin away, but decided to open it. Instead of a phone number, which she expected, it had a beautiful drawing of a tree and red flowers near a pond, and a note in French that said “you are truly beautiful.” She kept the drawing and still cherishes it.

So be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Pray to discover this experience, if you haven’t yet experienced it. Pray for help in your ongoing program of becoming transformed and spiritualized by God. Incorporate that into your philosophy and your beliefs. As the Church Father Irenaeus wrote, “Christ became what we are in order that we might become what he is” (*Against Heresies* 5 preface).