

“Prayer for the Journey: Pleasing God”

Romans 12:1-2 ¹

Some years ago, Liz Curtis was one of the best-known talk show personalities on the radio, and she lived quite a wild life. In fact, at one point, Liz worked with Howard Stern at a hard rock station in Detroit. Howard Stern had the morning show, and Liz had the afternoon show, and one day Howard Stern said to Liz, “You know, Liz, you need to clean up your act.”² Now you probably realize that such a statement is pretty amazing indeed if *Howard Stern* is saying it, and so you *know* that Liz Curtis really did live “on the wild side.”

After Howard’s exhortation, Liz decided to make some effort to clean up her life, and because she’d been burned by so many men and had her heart broken so many times, Liz became a militant feminist. But Liz Curtis also had a Christian girlfriend who kept inviting her to church. So one day, after *many* invitations, Liz said, “Okay, I’ll go to church with you one time and ONE TIME ONLY.”

Well, wouldn’t you know that the pastor just happened to be teaching that day on Ephesians 5:22, which says, “*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands.*” Now that’s not a very good place to start with a militant feminist, and Liz did get angry . . . but she kept listening. Two verses later, Paul went on to say, “*and husbands - you sacrifice yourselves; you give yourselves for your wives just as Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself for the church and died for her*” (Ephesians 5:25).

When Liz heard that, she leaned over to her friend and said cynically, “well, shoot, I’d gladly give myself to a man if I knew he would die for me.” And her friend whispered back, “Liz, there *is* a man who loved you enough to die for you. His name is Jesus Christ. And that **is** how much He loves you.”

It wasn’t too long after that moment that Liz Curtis surrendered her life to God’s persistent and amazing love, and she became a follower of Jesus. Today, Liz Curtis is a well-known Christian author and speaker, and she’s married to one of my fraternity brothers, Don Higgs.

And now, with that story loaded into your memory, hear this morning’s text again:
¹ *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.* ² *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will* (Romans 12:1-2).

We’re now in the second week of our Lenten study, *Prayer for the Journey*, and some of you know that this week’s topic is “Pleasing God.” As I often do, I began preparation for this sermon by going to *WORDsearch* to examine the occurrences of such ideas in the Bible. (You can download a free version of *WORDsearch* at www.bible-explorer.com.)

I was surprised to discover that in the New International Version, at least, the words “please,” “pleasing,” “pleasure,” and “pleasant” do not occur even once in the Hebrew Scriptures. Happily, they occur forty-five times in the New Testament, with our text being one of the very few places where those ideas occur in sequential verses. Actually, Romans 1:1 talks about ways in which we might please God, and Romans 1:2 talks about ways in which God pleases us.

In these two verses, Paul is going to both ask for something and promise something, and he prefaces both the ask and the promise with the phrase, “*in view of God’s mercy.*” What Paul

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on February 17, 2013.

² www.lizcurtishiggs.com/about-liz/lizs-journey-of-faith/

means by that phrase is the same thing Liz Curtis meant when she told her friend, “I’d gladly give myself to a man if I knew he would die for me.” Here’s how that works

As Paul began his letter to the Ephesians—the very same letter from which the sermon came when Liz went to worship with her friend—he wrote that God “**chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will**” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

Did you get that? Paul is saying that God **knew you, loved you, and chose you** before God ever spoke Creation into existence, and that anticipating your arrival and adoption into God’s family brought God great pleasure! **That’s how God feels about you**, and it was such amazing love and such amazing grace to which Paul referred when he wrote, “*in view of God’s mercy.*”

To say that another way, “**God made you to love you!**” So whenever you’re tempted to think that your life has no significance, that you don’t really matter, **remember that God made you, loves you, and desires to enjoy your company forever.** While that outcome doesn’t happen automatically, Jesus came to Earth, died on the Cross, and rose again from death in order to make that outcome *possible* (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus was walking down the street one day and a guy came up to Him and said, “Lord, what’s the most important command in the whole Bible?” And Jesus says, “Okay, here it is. This is the most important thing. I’m going to summarize the whole Bible for you. If you don’t get anything else, get this. It’s the most important.” And then Jesus said, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*”

God says, “If you don’t get anything else, here’s what you’re supposed to do in life: you’re supposed to learn to love Me back, because I made you to love you and I know you. And I want you to know Me and love Me back.” There’s actually a word for “loving God back,” and that word is “worship.”

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “worship”? You may think of prayer. You may think of singing. You may think of ritual or communion or going to church, but worship is both more and less than all those things. The fact of the matter is that **worship is simply knowing God and loving God back.** That’s what Jesus was telling us by highlighting what we call the Great Commandment, and that’s what Paul means by telling us in our text that offering our bodies to God as a living sacrifice is our “*true and proper worship*” (Romans 12:1).

God loves us first, then we love God back. That’s how worship works. God always makes the first move. God creates us. God forgives us. God saves us. God blesses us. God protects us. And in return we “*offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which is our true and proper worship.*”

When Jesus lifted up the Great Commandment, He also gave us some clues about how worship works. And Rick Warren has used the Great Commandment to point out that God wants us to love Him in three ways:

First, God wants us to love Him **thoughtfully.** Jesus told us to “*love God with all your mind.*” In other words, God wants you to consider your love for Him carefully, not to just go through “worship motions” without thinking. You don’t have to check your mind at the door to follow Jesus. Second, God wants us to love Him **passionately**, “*with all your heart and all your soul.*” It’s as though God says, “I want you to love Me passionately, because I have passionate love for you.” That’s why Jesus came—so we’d understand God’s love for us. And third, God

wants us to love Him **practically**, “*with all your strength*”; that is, with your gifts, skills, and abilities.

“You see,” Rick said, “the truth is that even though God created the entire universe, which obviously includes you, there are three things God does not have unless you give them to Him:

- God doesn’t have your attention unless you give it to Him. That’s loving God with your mind.
- God doesn’t have your affection, unless you give it to Him. That’s loving God with your heart and your soul.
- And God doesn’t have your ability, unless you give it to Him. That’s loving God with your strength.

“And whenever we take what God has given us—the ability to focus attention; the ability to be passionate; the skill to do things—whenever we take the things God has given to us and we give them back to God, that,” says Rick, “is the heart of worship.”³

Well, let’s think about those three things very briefly. The first thing Rick suggested is that we **give God our attention**. The very best reason to focus your attention on God is that God loves you passionately and is passionately focused on you. Psalm 139 points out that ¹ *You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.* ² *You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.* ³ *You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.* ⁴ *Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely* (Psalm 139:1-4).

One of the easiest ways to begin giving your attention to God is to establish a daily time to be with God. You don’t have to begin with a long period of time, and it doesn’t matter at what time of day you do it. Just stop everything else and simply be with God. Read God’s Word. Talk to God. Don’t try to use fancy or “religious” words. Just be yourself. The goal is to develop a conversational friendship with God, who cares for you . . . rather like you love your own children or grandchildren.

While worship involves focusing my attention on God; it also involves **expressing my affection** to God. True worship has to do with loving God with your heart and soul, and it can begin as simply as saying, “I love you” to God.

While that *sounds* easy, it may not actually *be* easy. Some of us grew up in families that weren’t emotionally expressive, and we didn’t hear or say “I love you” very much. Maybe your growing up experiences were painful, or your human parents didn’t give you much to love.

Even so, I’ll bet you remember the first time you ever said “I love you” to somebody. You were probably scared to death. You had sweaty palms. Your stomach was in a knot. You were afraid of what the response might be—or might not be. It’s pretty risky to say, “I love you.”

But the wonderful thing about God is that God has already taken away all that risk. God has already said “I love you,” first, and God has said it in a thousand ways. God created you. God has brought you to this very moment. And even when you weren’t paying attention and didn’t know it, God has been loving you—just as God was loving Liz Curtis long before she realized it. So you don’t have to worry about who is going to say it first (1 John 4:19).

³ Rick Warren “You Were Planned for God’s Pleasure,” a sermon in the *40 Days of Purpose* Series, www.purposedriven.com.

The most important thing you can know in life is that God loves you. And the most important thing you can do in life is to love God back. You can start by just saying “thanks.” Start looking around at everything and start thanking God: “God, thank you for a beautiful sky today.” “Thank you for green trees.” “Thank you for clean air.” “Thank you that I live in America.” “Thank you that I live in Columbia.” You could go on and on. Everything you look at is a gift from God. So you could just start by being thankful.

Singing is another good way to worship God, whether you can carry a tune or not. Or you could whistle. Or you could paint or draw, or write a poem. You could express your love to God in any of a thousand ways. And of course, the very best way to express affection to God is by doing what Paul talks about in our text: to give your life, your very self to Him.

Worship involves focusing my attention on God. Worship involves expressing my affection to God, and, third, worship involves **using my abilities for God**, loving God “with all my strength.”

After nearly forty years of marriage, I’ve learned that it takes more than just words and kisses and Valentine cards to express affection. Sometimes there are chores to be done. Sometimes there are things that need to be fixed. Sometimes there are responsibilities to be shared. I do demonstrate my love for Jill with cards and flowers, but I also express my love by fixing, helping, serving, and sharing all of life with her. And such service is part of worship, too.

Colossians 3:23 tells us, “*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for people.*” Let me say that again: “**Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for people.**” Once that idea sinks into your heart, it will revolutionize your life.

You don’t have to join a monastery or a convent in order to worship God more completely. You don’t have to have a five-hour quiet time or to come to church every day of the week. **In order to worship God with your abilities, you just change who you’re working for, so that your work becomes worship.**

We frequently make the mistake of compartmentalizing our lives, with worship in our Sunday morning compartment and the rest of life in another compartment; but God wants to be invited into every area of your life, to be involved in all of it. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker. You can do that for God.

You may be a carpet cleaner, or an attorney, or a nurse, or a parent at home raising children. You may be an executive or a manager or sales person; you may be a physician or a truck driver. It doesn’t matter what you do nearly as much as Who you do it for.

And so if you’re good at repairing things, you can go out tomorrow morning and say, “God, I want to repair things this week as if I’m doing it for you.” And if you’re good at cooking, you can say, “God, I’m going to cook this meal, whether it’s for my family or for a restaurant, as if I’m doing it for You.” If you’re good at filing and organizing, you could say, “God, I’m going to file these things away as if I’m doing it for You.” And that simple change in attitude turns your work into worship, such that you’re worshipping God all day long every day, not just in church. God doesn’t want your worship to just be a church thing. **God wants your whole life to be worship.**

And as we live into the reality of this new, broader understanding of worship, we also live into the reality of the second verse of our text: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will* (Romans 12:2).

Sometimes we get all hung up on “discovering the will of God”; but as we learn to let our whole lives become our worship, we can relax into the glad discovery that God made us all with different interests and abilities, and that God’s will for you may very well involve doing what you’re already interested in doing! God made you as you are for good reason!

I like the way Frederick Buechner put it when he wrote that “neither the hair shirt [being too hard on yourself] nor the soft berth [being too easy on yourself] will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁴

Listen to that again: **“The place God call you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”** Once you have discovered that place, you will know indeed how “good, pleasing and perfect” God’s will is.

⁴Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.