

# Romans 12:1-8

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*Sunday 25 May*

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This whole area of knowing God's will is something I wanted to speak about this morning because I think that many, probably most of us struggle with this issue of knowing & doing God's will – whether at the big picture level like - what do you want me to do with my life, what job or career should I have, or who should I marry? Or at the more specific level of what should I do today, or should I buy this new pair of shoes or this new car, or if you're a single person – should I go out with this person or that person or nobody at all not? I think most of us really struggle with a pervasive sense of Uncertainty around this question of knowing God's will, and his uncertainty can be paralyzing.

Most of us – Christians or non-Christians - struggle to know what we should be doing with our lives. We have these fleeting moments – or peak experiences - when we just know we are in the centre of God's will, when it almost is as if we are hearing God's voice. But I think if we are honest, most of the time most of us have a sense of frustration or unease that comes with that nagging question “am I doing the right thing with my life?” Many of us – Christian or non-Christian, live with the fear that maybe we 're going to waste our lives.

There's a quote from Oliver Wendell Homes that captures this fear, when he says

**Many people die with their music still in them. Why is this so?  
Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live.  
Before they know it, time runs out.** Oliver Wendell Homes

So much of the time it feels like we are getting ready to live, rather than living the life Christ has for us, doesn't it?

I have to say, sometimes I've heard this passage preached in a way that is a little confusing. But actually I think it's possible to draw out of it four clear, practical principles – which are these:

- 1. Offer yourself** to God
- 2. Don't conform** to the world's goals
- 3. Be transformed** towards Kingdom goals
- 4. Use your gifts** to serve others.

And these four principles are dynamic and interactive and form a feedback loop. For example, it is as we use our gifts to serve others that we offer ourselves to God in a deeper way, and are transformed. And it is as we refuse to be conformed to the world's agenda, but adopt the Kingdom of God's agenda, that we are enabled to do this.

But this morning, I don't want to talk you about the Greek meaning of these words, or try and analyse the passage that way, but rather I'm going to tell a few stories that I think illustrate what the passage is saying. And I think I'm in good company here, because I don't think Jesus ever bothered explaining to his disciples the Greek or Aramaic meaning of any of his words, but rather he used stories to illustrate.

So first up, I want to tell you a story I heard a couple of weeks ago that since then has really stuck in my mind, particularly the punch-line prayer that it finishes with. This story was told by a missionary couple visiting NZ recently; their names were Lindsay & Myc, Myc being a Dutch name.

Lyndsay & Myc had studied missiology and then gone out to start & pastor churches in Mexico among middle-class University students, where they were quite successful & indeed did plant several new churches among students. After this, their mission agency asked them to move to Madrid, in Spain and plant churches there, just as they had successfully done in Mexico.

They then spent the next two years working with students in Spain using the same strategy & approach they had used in Mexico, but with pretty much zero success

They also tried to start a church in a needy low income area near where they lived. But the problem was, no one cared. It became apparent that no one in that area even wanted a church.

Exasperated, they began to question their strategy, and began to ask God what his agenda was.

About that time a drug addict named Raul turned up & convinced the Lindsay & Myc, to give him a bed in their small flat. Raul, like many addicts saw these Christian's as a soft touch, and duly turned out to be a really difficult & annoying person to live with. Well over time, Raul made a Christian commitment, & his drug culture friends began to see changes in him, which they wanted, & so Raul asked if he could start inviting these friends around to talk about God. But Lindsay & Myc, found these people also to be quite annoying and time consuming & so Lindsay began to complain to God "why can't you send me 'normal people' with which to start a church, that's why I came here - I came here to start churches, not to do "social work!".

Anyway, long story short, God continued to bring these not-so-normal people to Lindsay and Myk, and then continued to do so for the next 30 years - & this couple have now worked with over 160,000 people, established 40 churches in many places, & helping a vast number of people out of addiction.

But here's the thing that really struck me. This is what they said was the key thing they learnt from all this about knowing God's will.

They now begin each day with this simple but profound prayer:

**“Good morning God. What are you up to - and can I join in?”**

Power point & say together

**“God, what are you up to, and how can I join in?”**

So one of the questions for us as Christians is how can we use our lives well, and get involved in doing things that really make a difference? How can we get involved in Really Useful Stuff (RUS). Here's a wee formula I really like

**Really Useful Stuff = where my abilities + willingness  
engage with the world's needs.**

And as you see in this formula, it isn't just having the ability to do something that counts, but the availability and willingness – and that's when things get challenging for us, because this will often call for sacrifice on our part.

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of meeting with a young man called Callum, who goes to Highgate Presy church up the hill here. I met with him because Callum is the manager of the Dunedin Training Centre here in town, which is a govt funded but privately run vocational training schooling that trains young people in both life-skills & trades skills like building, welding & panel beating. Callum stepped up for this role a couple of years ago when the Training Centre was struggling, & in danger of closing. Now Callum is a qualified chartered accountant, and to take on this role at the Training Centre, he left a much better paid, that had a much more

secure, & much more lucrative future – a job with an accounting firm.

This very ordinary Christian guy called Callum saw some real needs, looked at his own skills as an accountant, & said “hey, I can do this, I can use my skills & training to meet these very real needs – that will help young people gain the skills they need to get jobs and to get a better life - & I’m willing to do it”.

Callum has found a way to take the step that I think trips many of us up. For many of us even when we see a need, and recognized that maybe, just maybe, God is asking us to respond to it, to step out of our comfort zone and take a risk – this is the step where most of us hesitate & often back away. So it’s not just *uncertainty* that holds us back, but also the *fear of risk*, of opportunities with unknowable outcomes or uncontrollable results. By definition a comfort zone is comfortable, and what’s outside it is uncomfortable, and our human nature dislikes discomfort.

But let’s be clear here. As Christians this is what we signed up for when we said yes to following Jesus. We didn’t sign up for a life of comfort, or ease, or standing in church singing melodic worship songs – we signed up to pick up a cross and follow Jesus wherever he might lead us, any where in this city and anywhere in this world. And when we say anywhere in this world, I think of Andrew & Liz from our community, only a few months ago

sheltering behind a tin fence in Southern Sudan while the military & the rebel forces were trading gun fire. So yes, there is risk involved in following Jesus – to the point where I would say, if we are continually choosing risk free or the lowest risk options all through our lives, maybe we are not really following Jesus.

Now another quote I really like

From Marie Curie, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century discoverer of radioactivity, who eventually died of leukemia:

**Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained.**

For we who are Christians I would like to modify the quote to say:

**“following Jesus is not easy – but what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in who Jesus has made us to be. We must believe that he has gifted for something and that this thing must be attained”.**

Now even when we’ve come to grips with this and said yes to Jesus – “Yes I will follow you wherever you take me”, there’s one more thing

that can hold us back or paralyse us – and I’ve really noticed this in my own life. And that is waiting the really ideal, really perfect option or opportunity to come along, before I’ll get involved. For many of us, the perfect becomes the enemy of the good, and so we end up neglecting all the smaller opportunities and invitations that God keeps presenting us with, because we are holding ourselves back for the perfect one, or the really ideal one, or the really big one.

So - two more quotes I really like:

Helen Keller, who became blind and deaf and mute due to meningitis when she was a baby, but who eventually went on to become an outstanding Christian writer and communicator, said

**“I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble”.**

And from Mother Teresa:

**“Not all of us can do great things.**

**But we can all do small things with great love”.**

And so first and foremost, in seeking to know God’s will, and in seeking to bring more of God’s Kingdom here on earth – we are all called to do small tasks with great love, to be every day heroes by

the faithfulness and courage and love we bring into each daily situation that God places us in.

Amongst us here this morning there are those who have been called to everyday heroes in schools (like Debbie), in colleges, others as nurses or caregivers or early childhood centres or as accountants or lawyers or students or cleaners or builders or landscapers, or as mothers or fathers or siblings or neighbours – or whatever role God has placed us in, to use our gifts to bless the world and meet its needs.

At the same time each of us need to be really open to God calling us to take more risks, and move out from a role that we feel comfortable in, to a place of even greater need, like Callum who I told you about earlier. I know for Susan and I when we sensed God's call to Cambodia & spent nearly 17 years there - and it was one of those peak experiences when God spoke to us in a very clear way – for Susan it meant giving up her dream of becoming a paediatrician, & stepping off that career pathway; for me it also meant giving up a job I really loved and paid well. But neither of us have ever regretted doing that, or the incredible adventure that life became for us because we said yes to Jesus at that time.

Ok now I want to return to this idea that ministry, or R.U.S (Really Useful Stuff) is where our abilities, willingness and availability engage with the world's needs. I know that in this church we have

many, many people who have taken that to heart & are living this out. And as a church, I think we are half way there. We have a lot of emphasis at Leith on the Strength Finders coaching for example, which helps us understand what we are gifted & wired for. But I'd like to talk a little more now about us taking the next step & coming to grips with the world's needs.

Let's start with NZ, and here in God's own country 800,000 New Zealander's live below the poverty line (as its drawn here), and that figure includes up to 270,000 children – up to 1 in 4 children in this country. We have the highest rate of child abuse and youth suicide of any of the OECD nations in the world. We have the highest rate of domestic violence and sexual violence of any of the OECD nations in the world, and 25% of NZ children during their lifetime get to witness this violence in their families.

What would happen if every church and every Christian in NZ took these horrible statistics to heart & declared spiritual warfare on them, and said “we're going to make a difference?” – instead of some of the much less important issues we seem to spend all our time arguing about & declaring war on as Christians? And what if all the prayers we prayed to see these figures impacted also lead us into practical, hands-on involvement in response to those needs? In other words, what if we were prepared to be the answer to our own prayers? (and we must always be prepared to be part of the answer to our own prayers).

And what if we are willing to look and respond even wider than just the NZ context - & Jesus does call us to have both a global and neighbourhood perspective?

Because we live in a world of huge need, where 8 million people will go to bed hungry tonight, because they simply didn't get enough food. And we live in a world where 20,000 children will die today simply because their families were too poor to find the food or the medicine to keep them alive. So again, what if every church in NZ, & in every country of the world, said "enough" and "we're going to do something about this & make a difference?" What if every church spent its resources on those issues, instead of spending so many resources on buildings and building maintenance? For one thing, a cynical world would view us with a lot more credibility than they do now.

Now I realise that there's a danger when someone lists the needs of the world, like I just have. There's the danger that we will be overwhelmed by those needs, & paralysed by the sense of not knowing where to start. And it's here that we need to come back to the prayer that our friend taught us earlier:

**God, what are you doing, and how can I join in?**

I'm want to mention here some of the things I see God doing through our church and into our community – & I realise I only know a small percentage of what folk are up to, & so if you are

involved in something I don't mention now please do let me or Helen know, because we need to be celebrating and promoting it.

But these are some of the things I know God is doing in and through us, and that he is inviting you to join in with.

I've been really inspired over the last few months to hear Janice talk about her involvement with the Syrian refugee family who have come to Dn. That is such a truly gospel thing to be involved in, & there will be this family & other families who's lives we could get involved with.

We have Dave Baab and Catherine McKinley working with overseas students in different ways, & being Jesus to them. That's a powerful ministry & you could talk to them about how you can get more involved.

We talked with Colin Fitzpatrick a couple of weeks ago about his involvement with prison visiting, and helping prisoners readjust to life back in Dunedin, and you could talk to Colin about how you could get more involved.

I know Rachel Pettigrew has been involved in mainly music & other neighbourhood involvement up in Pinehill, & if you live in that are she' love to get you more involved.

Rachel Elder is does tremendous stuff at Workbridge, finding jobs for longterm unemployed people, and I know Rachel is always wanting to talk to employers and work places that could provide job opportunities or training.

Of course, we have Student Soul here doing a tremendous job with our students, and I'm sure Ivan would love to talk with you about ways you could get more involved with that ministry.

And as you know, I along with many others from Leith are involved with the Rock Solid youth programmes in South Dn, working with unchurched and at risk youth. We are always looking for more volunteer youth leaders (Alex), for mentors, for those who can provide meals, for those who could undergird what we do in prayer & financially. And you can talk to me after the service about that if you'd like to help.

And as I say, this is only a fraction of what is happening in & thru us, that you could be involved with

You see, there is no way to spiritual growth than thru service. This is integral to our discipleship. In a largely educated, relatively affluent church like ours, we need to be mindful of couple of things.

Firstly, Jesus said **“those to whom much has been given, from them much is expected” (Luke 12:48)**, and secondly, we have to realise that the effectiveness of a church is not measured by how good its Sunday services are, or how good it’s music is, or how good it’s speakers are. The effectiveness of a church is measured by how much of an authentic community it really is, and by how much it is involved in genuine ministry and mission to the community around it, by how much it is helping to bring more of God’s Kingdom into this world. Remember, the goal of the Christian life is not simply that we get to go to heaven, the goal, is that we bring more of heaven to earth.

So as we finish our service this morning – if God has spoken to you about taking another step, another risk in your following of him, I encourage you to take it. And if you feel something stirring, but aren’t exactly sure what it is – keep asking God & praying that prayer **“God, what are you up to, and how can I join in?”**

and I’d encourage you to talk to one of the people I have mentioned today. And of course there will be people available to pray with you down the front here.