

A Living Sacrifice

One of the reasons I love the book of Romans is because the flow of the text is so logically presented that it becomes very easy to follow Paul's arguments. Not that there isn't difficult doctrines in there, but that the way they are presented is very ordered. We started this study establishing man's need for a savior. Paul laid out for us that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty before God and therefore condemned in their sin if left alone with their own righteousness. But thankfully, like a superhero bursting onto the scene of Romans 3, we learn about the justification of man before God on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ. And it's this faith that imputes another's righteousness to our own account. And of course, we know it is the very righteousness of Christ that is gifted to us in salvation. And because it is a perfect righteousness, our forgiveness is secured, the wrath of God is satisfied, and we are brought into the family of God by the blood of Jesus Christ. We then move into Paul's explanation of the new life we live in Christ. How we were baptized into the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are dead to our sin but alive to God in Christ. We saw in Romans 7 how the flesh still remained in us, but learned in Romans 8 the power we now have through the Holy Spirit to put to death the deeds of the flesh and have true, Spirit-filled life. This culminated in our ultimate glorification, where sin and death will be done away with, and we will be completely conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. And then last time we met, we looked at God's ultimate plan for the salvation of Israel. That their gathering at the end will usher in the ultimate restoration of all things that were created. And from all of this, we learn that God is over the beginning, the middle, and the end of our salvation. And not only ours, but all those throughout history who have and will believe in His name.

But now we come to Romans 12 tonight as we continue the study through the book of Romans, and chapter 12 represents a big transition point in this letter from Paul to the church at Rome. And like any great pastor, Paul is going to move from the doctrinal portion of his letter to the more practical portion of his letter. From knowledge to application, from indicatives to imperatives, from who we are in Christ to how we should live in Christ. And this is an important shift to make, not only as we are teaching through the scriptures, but as we are living them out in our day to day lives. It is said that many people will miss heaven by 18 inches. And that is the distance from their head to their hearts. That as we are going throughout the Bible, it is not enough to just know the doctrines that are taught, but to love them, to cherish them, to believe them wholeheartedly and fervently, allowing them to stir within us praise and worship unto God. But we must go even further than this, we must allow that love for God in our hearts to produce in us the proper fruits and obedience desired by Jesus in our lives. For this is the ultimate purpose of God to bring glory unto Himself. Jesus says in Matthew 5:

[Mat 5:16 NKJV] 16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

These good works, flowing from a heart that loves God and is surrendered to the working of the Holy Spirit, bring glory to God here on earth. That we cannot bottle up our Christian life in one time a week worship services. There are some who would wish to live their Christian life like

this. They take grace to mean that there are no necessary works now to take part in and that the whole sum of the Christian experience can take place within the four walls of a church sanctuary. But this is not the Christian life desired by Christ. For notice the words of Jesus that He left with His disciples as their marching orders for the discipleship of the world:

[Mat 28:19-20 NKJV] 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, [even] to the end of the age." Amen.

From this verse we see the means that Jesus leaves for the disciples to make more disciples is to baptize them, in other words, to share the gospel and bring them into the family of God, but then also to teach them to observe all the things that He has commanded. And notice, it's not just to teach them the things commanded, but to teach them to observe them. That yes, Jesus does care about our obedience. Not in a legalistic sense, as if it were earning favor with God, but in the sense that when we truly understand the doctrines of grace, and when those doctrines penetrate and cut us to the heart, then it is necessary that from the heart comes obedience to the commands of Christ. There should be an unbreakable connection between what we know, what we believe and what we do. And this of course is what faith really is, we could read all of the various examples we have in Hebrews 11 of people who believed who God was and what He said and how it lead them to do incredible things. So let's read together here, in Romans 12:1, as Paul begins to now show us how who we are in Christ should impact what we do:

[Rom 12:1 NKJV] 1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, [which is] your reasonable service.

This, like Romans 8:28 which we looked at a few weeks ago, is one of the most jam packed verses in the Bible. If there were going to be a mantra for all Christians everywhere to rally around in their Christian walk and service to God, this would be a tough verse to beat in terms of its explanation of what a faithful Christian life of worship really looks like. And I think it's important to really look at each phrase here in this verse to capture its total implications for our lives as saved and called people.

The first word that jumps off the page to me is therefore. Any time you encounter the word therefore in your Bible study, it is important to ask the question "for what is that therefore, there for?" And sometimes the answer to that question is abundantly obvious, but other times, we have to do some digging. The first place it makes sense to look naturally is what the author has just gotten through saying previously. So if we take a look back to chapter 11, we see the great doxology that Paul ends with as he gets through talking about God's great plan of salvation for both Gentile and Jew and He says:

[Rom 11:33-36 NKJV] 33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable [are] His judgments and His ways past finding out! 34 "For who

has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?" 35 "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?" 36 For of Him and through Him and to Him [are] all things, to whom [be] glory forever. Amen.

So we see looking back then, that in verse 36, Paul says that "of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever". And if all things are really of God, and have their life through God, and are given to God for His glory forever, that would certainly be grounds for this command to give our lives as living sacrifices to God. Because that would certainly be to the glory of God! But I think this therefore reaches back even further than this, because notice the therefore is followed by the prepositional phrase "by the mercies of God".

Well, what are the mercies of God? They are everything that we have talked about in the book of Romans up until this point. The mercies of God are all of the spiritual blessings and realities bought for us by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. It is the fact that we have been taken from dead sinners, to living children of God, it's the justification, the sanctification and the glorification which is ours in Christ. So the foundation of the ginormous exhortation Paul is about to give here, and it is a huge one, is all that Christ has done for us. It's all we've looked at here as we have looked into the great Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And this is certainly one of the greatest paradoxes in Christian living. Because we really are the richest poor people in existence. Poor because we in and of ourselves, having nothing valuable, or desirable, or good to use in the glory of God. But because of our poor spirit, because we realize we have no reason to glory in the flesh, God is well pleased to bestow upon us as it says Ephesians 1:3:

[Eph 1:3 NKJV] 3 Blessed [be] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly [places] in Christ,

Or as Paul explains in Romans 8:32

[Rom 8:32 NKJV] 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

That without God, we are broke, we are destitute, we are poor, naked, miserable and blind! But with God, because of God's great love for us, because of the rich mercies of God that are poured out on us on the basis of the justifying work of Jesus Christ, we are rich beyond measure. And so this therefore is huge, because we must walk in the mercies of God. We must never lose sight of our first love. When we do, when we begin to walk in the power of our own flesh in our service of God, we are doomed to fail. So we must therefore remember who we are in Christ first, before we set out to serve Him. And it's on this proper foundation that we are able to venture into this exhortation from Paul.

Back to verse 1, we see the english translation in the New King James says "I beseech you therefore, brethren". In the greek, the words here are "parakaleo" "adelphos". And hopefully

some of this greek is starting to sound familiar to you. We see that word Kaleo in there, which means to call, and when paired with the other root “para” we get a word in the greek that indicates a strong urging. Often times, in other places in the new testament, it is translated as the word beg. And the reason I bring this up is because I think it shows us a little bit of the tone and attitude Paul has for these believers in Christ. This is not a rebuke of their conduct, this is not an authoritative indicative as an angry father might give to a disobedient child, no this seems to be a passionate plea to the believers here in Rome to take what Paul is fixing to say seriously for their joy. It’s an invitation to a better way of life and service. And I think this is important to remember. A lot of people’s view of God’s commands are very skewed. They think God’s just there to suck the fun out of everything and to make them miserable their whole lives until they get to heaven. But this is not the Biblical view of God, for remember Jesus promise He gave to the disciples in the upper room, saying in John 15:

[Jhn 15:9-11 NKJV] 9 "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. 10 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11 "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and [that] your joy may be full.

That Jesus promises joy as the result of this obedience to all that He commands. He is not threatening the disciples, but compelling them by His own love for them, and to walk in this joy that He has placed in their heart. And this is the same attitude I think shown by Paul here. He calls them brethren. Paul identifies with them in this command. His own life was a living sacrifice to the Lord. He was not excluded from his own words but realized that this call to sacrificial service was for all Christians regardless of their position. And this is true today. This call to sacrificial service to the Lord is not just to pastors, and preachers, and teachers, but to all people are called according to the purpose of God. That you, if you are indeed loved and bought by Jesus, are called to this exhortation. That Paul is reaching through the page here to speak to you and me personally tonight, because we are his brothers and sisters in Christ, and this command is just as much for you and I that it was for the believers in Rome that Paul was writing to.

So now notice, back in verse 1, what Pauls exhorts us to here, where he says:

[Rom 12:1 NKJV] 1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, [which is] your reasonable service.

Because of the mercies of God, because of the great gospel and the great salvation we have been called into, we should now offer our bodies a living sacrifice to God. This idea of offering our bodies as a sacrifice to the Lord goes much deeper than just offering our physical bodies. Paul seems to mean we should offer all of ourselves to the Lord. This definitely includes our bodies, but also our mind, our hearts, our emotions, our intentions, our desires, everything that we have should be given in dedication and sacrifice to the Lord, because of the great love He has poured out on us. That we are called to bring ourselves on to the altar for the Lord’s service. And this is not restrained to just one day a week, or one night a week, or for a few hours a day.

This is an ongoing, minute by minute, second by second, offering of our whole lives and full dedication to the Lord. The greatest question you can ask throughout your day is “Lord, what might you have me do for you today?”. What do you desire of me this very second? Too many people compartmentalize their lives in a way that separates out the perceived “spiritual” or “sacred” and the regular, day to day things. When in reality, the Lord desires our whole lives to be lived for His glory. That there isn’t a time, whether you are at work or whether you are at home with your family, or whether you are by yourself in the car, that you aren’t living as a sacrifice to the Lord. He should be on our minds all the time.

This was one of the things that I experienced so strongly when I was first saved. Before I truly knew Jesus, I thought very little of God. He rarely crossed my mind in the day to day things of life. Sure, I would go to church some Sundays and think about Him there, but when I went throughout my week, I thought very little of Him and rather I would just think about me all the time.

But when God did that work in my heart by the Holy Spirit, I found that I could not go a day without thinking about God. That there were many days, that He was all I thought about. I would be in class, and I would be thinking of God. I would be falling asleep in my dorm room, and I would be thinking of God. There is something so pleasant about that thought. That I was able to think about Him and live my life for Him, no matter where I was and no matter what I was doing.

And later on, I found out what was happening in my life was the result of the Holy Spirit which lived in me, for we saw in Romans 8 that:

[Rom 8:6-7 NKJV] 6 For to be carnally minded [is] death, but to be spiritually minded [is] life and peace. 7 Because the carnal mind [is] enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.

As a devout Jew, Paul knew all about the various sacrifices made to the Lord. There were 5 different types of sacrifices routinely made to the Lord according to the Jewish law. Those 5 sacrifices could be separated into two different categories. The first category would have been the mandatory sacrifices. The mandatory sacrifices were the sin offering and the trespass offering. These are the sacrifices that we often relate to the finished work of Jesus Christ today. We no longer have any need to make these sacrifices because we know as the book of Hebrews describes:

[Heb 10:11-14 NKJV] 11 And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, 13 from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. 14 For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.

So Jesus Christ made a perfect atonement for our sin. We are forever cleansed by the blood of Jesus and therefore never again need to make animal sacrifice that could not take away sin because Jesus has made perfect sacrifice for us.

But there was another type of sacrifice offered in the old testament that could be categorized as a voluntary sacrifice. And these sacrifices, there were 3 of them, and they are described as voluntary sacrifices because they were not made as a response to sin, but rather as an act of worship before God. They were a gift of service, an act of worship, meant so that the offerer could fellowship with God and show God his love and adoration.

And there was one of these sacrifices in particular that I think is worth looking at tonight because I think it bears weight on Romans 12:1 and I think it is maybe what Paul had in mind when he gave this exhortation to the church here at Rome. This sacrifice was called the burnt offering sacrifice or the “ola” in the Hebrew language. And this is how God prescribed this act of worship in the old testament:

[Lev 1:3-9 NKJV] 3 'If his offering [is] a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; **he shall offer it of his own free will** at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD. 4 'Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. 5 'He shall kill the bull before the LORD; and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around on the altar that [is by] the door of the tabernacle of meeting. 6 'And he shall skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. 7 'The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay the wood in order on the fire. 8 'Then the priests, Aaron's sons, shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat in order on the wood that [is] on the fire upon the altar; 9 'but he shall wash its entrails and its legs with water. **And the priest shall burn all on the altar as a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD.**

There were two ideas being communicated within this sacrifice. The first of course being a picture of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. We see this as the offerer places his hand upon the head of the animal, and the blood being poured out making atonement for the offerer. But there's a second element to this free will sacrifice being made. And it is one in which the entire animal is burnt on the altar before God. This is the only sacrifice made in which the entire animal is burnt before God. In the other animal sacrifices, there was left off a portion for either the priests to eat or for the worshiper to partake in. But this sacrifice was special before the Lord because it represented the worshiper's desire to be totally in surrender to God. For God to have it “all” so to speak. It was an offering of complete and total dedication to the Lord. And I think it's fitting that this sacrifice speak of both Jesus and His followers. Because we know the words of Jesus, which say:

[Luk 9:22-24 KJV] 22 Saying, The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day. 23 And he said to [them] all, If any [man] will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his

cross daily, and follow me. 24 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.

That we see, the Son of Man, our perfect example of a life lived in complete and total offering before God, had to suffer and be slain. And then He turns to His disciples and says if anyone desires to come after me, he must do the same! He must take up His cross, He must head to the altar so to speak, and offer his life! Jesus is our perfect example, He is the author and the finisher of our faith, and the one whose life we look to as the perfect example of what it looks like to live life as a living sacrifice before the Lord. So we must be like those animals, who were completely offered upon the altar of God for His good pleasure. Totally burned up for the glory of God. And that includes every and all aspects of our lives. That includes our best effort in keeping every commandment of the Lord Jesus.

But notice, this sacrifice is a living sacrifice. It is not like the animal, that is chopped up and placed on the altar to be burned! We are a living sacrifice. And this comes with it's issues. Because when we begin to be burned up and offered to the Lord, our flesh has a tendency to want to crawl off of that altar. Our flesh wants to do everything it can to prevent us from walking in service to the Lord. Because it is a living sacrifice, it must be brought again and again unto that altar until it stands in the fire praising and thanking the Lord.

And everything else that is written in this chapter and the next few are predicated upon this exhortation from Paul. No one naturally desires to keep any of the next commandments that Paul is going to give in this chapter. They are supernaturally kept by the working of the Holy Spirit and the offering of ourselves upon the altar. Take verses 6-8 for example:

[Rom 12:6-8 NKJV] 6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, [let us use them]: if prophecy, [let us prophesy] in proportion to our faith; 7 or ministry, [let us use it] in [our] ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; 8 he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Using our gifts in public service of the Lord is a scary thing. It's not something we desire to do naturally. It requires vulnerability and faith in the Lord. I was reminded of this a couple weeks back, when I had to make a presentation for work in front of a room of 50 or so people. I got up on that stage and grabbed the mic and I could feel my legs shaking beneath me, my hands were sweating profusely, and the whole time I was talking it felt as if my throat was going to close shut! Brandon can attest to this, I was incredibly shy and scared and anxious growing up. I hated public speaking and I hated talking to strangers. I still do!

But I remember early on in my Christian walk, falling in love with the Word of God, and being able to look at a text and break it down, phrase by phrase, and exult the God I saw in the Word! And my Christian friends would make jokes and tell me that I would be preaching the Bible one day. And I knew that this had come from God. Because I would never, in my flesh, volunteer to be speaking in front of people week by week, opening up my heart to them, unless the Spirit of

God had come inside me. And there are still weeks where I feel my flesh wanting to crawl off that altar in this service to God. Up until the very moment I plant my feet here behind the pulpit, I am so nervous to open my mouth, but God seems to provide every time. And it is by the grace of God alone that words come out of my mouth up here. And this is a good illustration of Romans 12:1, because really, all we need to do is to get up on that altar, to set our hearts and minds upon doing the work, but it is really God who is doing the work through us. We must just plant our feet upon His altar for sacrifice, and watch what Christ does through us. This is what Paul says in Galatians 2:20:

[Gal 2:20 NKJV] 20 "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the [life] which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Paul's whole body is up on that cross, on that altar of service, and the life which he now lives, He knows it is Christ in Him! He must come in faith, yielding himself in service step by step, day by day, knowing and trusting that God is going to do what He has promised to do!

And this is true whether we are sharing our spiritual gifts, or whether we are simply looking to live a life that is pleasing to God. This is the type of life that is described in verses 9-16, where it says:

[Rom 12:9-16 NKJV] 9 [Let] love [be] without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. 10 [Be] kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; 11 not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12 rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; 13 distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.

None of these things are possible without first stepping upon that altar to God. We can not love without hypocrisy, without having first all of those secret intentions of our hearts burned away by the fires. I know how manipulative my own actions can be in my flesh. I remember growing up, how anytime I knew I was going to ask my parents for something, I would first clean my room, or do the dishes, or try to do something to paint myself in a favorable light first. That's love with hypocrisy. That's love with a hidden purpose or motive behind it. That's a fake kind of love. And it's a love that I know even as a Christian, I must stand upon the altar and watch that kind of hypocritical love die.

Giving preference to my brothers in Christ is not something I want to do naturally. It's an act of service and worship before God. I must do it intentionally and fully because I know naturally, I want to give preference to myself. I want to make my road easier. I want people to serve me and take care of my needs. So I must bring that before God.

Blessing those who curse us is not our natural reaction. When I hear someone being critical towards me, my first response is to give it right back to them. To begin to tear them down and lay before them all the things wrong of them! But this is not the Christian life. This is not the life modeled to us by Jesus Christ. So I must die. I must die to myself in that moment and instead of cursing them, I must bless them. But the biggest thing is I must die. I must deny myself and take up that cross of humility!

So we see, verse 1 is the foundation for everything else that comes after it in the remaining chapters in the book of Romans. Because without placing ourselves upon the Altar of God, we will never partake in the Christian life that Jesus promised would bring us joy. We as Christians are called to die to find life.

I remember when I first became a believer, the words of "The wonderful cross" by Chris Tomlin would bring me to tears everytime I heard it. Because when God brought me to life, I finally understood its meaning. I saw that the true way to life, to real life, to eternal life, was to die. To die to my own selfish ambitions and desires. To die to my own wants and needs. And to truly find my life in Jesus Christ alone.

And so when I would sing:

When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory died
My richest gain, I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride
See from His head, His hands, His feet
Sorrow and love flow mingled down
Did ever such love and sorrow meet?
Or thorns compose, so rich a crown
Oh the wonderful Cross, oh the wonderful Cross
Bids me come and die and find that I may truly live
Oh the wonderful Cross, oh the wonderful Cross
All who gather here by grace, draw near and bless Your name

There are so many paradoxical statements hidden here within the words of this song. How could a cross which killed the Prince of Glory being wondrous? How could my richest gain be

counted as loss? How can sorrow and love mingle down together? How can a crown of thorns compose such rich a crown? How can I die to find life in Jesus?

Yet this is the life we live and proclaim as believers. This is the life that we are being called into. One of much death and sacrifice, but one of great life and hope. But we must bring ourselves. We must complete that chain of the mind, to the heart, to the hands and feet. We must set ourselves to die, constantly as a living sacrifice before God, so that we may partake in this wonderful life that Jesus Christ has set before us. So that we may bring glory to God and be fruitful to His service.

Because notices how Paul ends verse one here:

[Rom 12:1 NKJV] 1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, **[which is] your reasonable service.**

When reading this verse, we may be tempted to think that Paul is being a little extreme here or hyperbolic. We may accuse him of being legalistic in our service to God. But Paul, to silence any doubt of whether he is being serious in his exhortation, let us know that this command to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice is really the reasonable thing to do.

That word “reasonable” in the Greek is “logikos”. This is where we get our English word for logic. Which is to say that in light of all that Jesus has done for us, it is only logical that we live our lives for Him as a living sacrifice. That we owe Jesus everything. Not in the sense that we are trying to pay back the debt which He paid on our behalf. Because we could not begin to ever pay back all that Jesus has done and is doing for us and will do for us even in the future. But we owe Jesus everything in the sense that we are who we are because He loves us. We are who we are because He is for us. We are who we are because He is the eternal foundation upon which our faith rests firmly.

Paul realized his service was all due to God’s grace, for he says in 1 Corinthians 15:

[1Co 15:9-10 NKJV] 9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God [which was] with me.

I love that phrase, by the grace of God, I am what I am. I owe everything to the grace and the love of God. And because of that, my life is now my own, I have no right to my body anymore, but instead it belongs to God for His service. And I pray that as we read these commands within the rest of this book, we will remember the foundation upon which they stand, being the mercies of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and our sacrificial service in response to His love.