

Living Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] Good morning again. Welcome to Church of the Advent. Chances are, if you were to go out on the street or ask most people, how does change happen in the Christian life or in life in general?

How do you know that somebody has authentically and truly changed, and where does that begin? Most people would probably say, well, real change has to begin within. It has to begin in your heart. It has to begin in your mind.

The thinking is that as we think differently, we will feel differently, and then we will begin to live differently. We live in the age of authenticity, as has been dubbed by many.

And in an age like ours, authenticity, authentic behavior, is really defined as behavior that is motivated by what is within us. You know, you have to feel it before you do it, and if you do it without feeling it, you're inauthentic, which is something that no one in our day and age wants to be. I think that there is definitely some truth to this. The counseling world is really, large parts of the counseling world are really built on the idea that you have to change people's thinking in order to change how they feel and live.

[1 : 20] And I do think that there's a lot of truth to this, which makes it all the more interesting when we look at the passage that we're going to look at this morning, Romans chapter 12, verses 1 through 8.

This is one of the most famous and well-known passages about spiritual growth in the Bible, about spiritual transformation. And to our surprise, Paul says here that if we want to experience spiritual renewal, if we want to be transformed, that that begins with our bodies, that our bodies are ground zero for spiritual change.

And, you know, we've been in a series the past few weeks talking about our physical bodies, the role they play and who we are and who we're becoming. And so far we've said a few things. We said our body is a gift. It's a handmade gift from the Lord. The next week we said that your body bears God's image and likeness.

And we talked a little bit about what that means. And the last week we said that your body is you. It's not a container that holds you. It is you.

[2 : 32] That body is a combination of matter and spirit as one. And so this week we're going to continue in this theme and we're going to see that our bodies are actually the key to change and growth in the Christian life.

I'll put it another way. Unless we appreciate the role of our bodies in determining who we are and who we're becoming, chances are at some point our growth as Christians will be stunted.

So we're going to look at three questions this morning. What does this mean? What does it mean for our bodies to be ground zero for spiritual change? How does it work?

And then finally, how do we know it's working? How do we know that change is happening? What's the evidence for that? Let's pray and then we'll open God's word. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you particularly for this passage, which is just, it's one that I've come back to again and again.

One that many people have memorized, Lord. And one that because of that it might be easy to pass over without really understanding the depth and the mystery that is captured here.

[3 : 41] And so I pray that you would open this word up to us this morning in ways that we need to hear. And I pray that those of us who are here complacent would be discomforted, that we would be challenged, that we would be catalyzed in some way.

And I pray that those who are here in great distress would be comforted, that they would find peace in these words. And we pray all of this in your son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, what does this

mean?

The role of our bodies in our growth and change. What are we talking about here? Well, Paul has just spent the first 11 chapters of the book of Romans essentially laying out the gospel.

11 chapter description of the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ who has come to save and to transform and to renew us in all of creation. And then after all of this, beginning in chapter 12, we finally get to the therefore.

11 chapters of gospel and now therefore. Here's what we do in response to this. In light of the gospel, how should we then live?

[4 : 48] And Paul says, I appeal to you, therefore. You know, I entreat you. I implore you. Brothers. He's talking to Jews and Greeks.

Right? They're no longer Jew or Greek. They're all one. They're a new people formed in the Holy Spirit to be all brothers and sisters in Christ. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God.

That's the only reason I'm saying this. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Now, we just need to stop and recognize how odd that would have been.

It sounds odd to us. It would have sounded every bit as odd to Paul's first hearers. It would have been shocking. Because the Greeks and the Romans tended to have a pretty low view of the body. We talked about this last week. They believed that spiritual things were inherently superior to physical things. So the last thing that they're expecting Paul to say is, here's how you respond to the gospel.

[5 : 45] Present your body as a living sacrifice. And I think that we still see that tendency in the church today. You hear people all the time. You know, it's a classic evangelical phrase to say, give your heart to Jesus.

But you don't often hear people say, give your body to Jesus. We talk about giving your heart to Jesus, giving your mind to Jesus. You don't hear body very often. But Paul says, give your body to him.

And he uses the word soma. So if we want to think, well, maybe it's kind of a metaphor. No, he uses a word that implies he's really actually talking about your body. Now, he's not only talking about your body.

Because let me ask you this. Is there anything that you can do right now sitting there that doesn't involve your body in some way? No, like all of our thinking, all of our feeling, it all requires a physiological hardware.

You know? So your body does encompass all of you. It's all of you. But Paul wants us to be focusing on our physicality, your body itself, your physical self.

[6 : 47] And we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. You know, the word present is a technical word that brings to mind the Old Testament priesthood. And the sacrificial system in the temple.

That's clearly what Paul wants us to think about, but with some key differences. A few differences between Old Testament sacrifices and what he's talking about here. Number one, this is not a way that we are called to deal with sin.

Paul's not saying, if you sin, present your body as a living sacrifice and you'll be forgiven. He's just spent 11 chapters laying out the fact that Jesus has done what no other sacrifice can do.

And that is to atone for sin once and for all. So he's made that absolutely clear. So what he's talking about here is a sacrifice of thanksgiving. A sacrifice of gratitude for what God has done through Jesus.

So that's the first difference. Second difference is this. Unlike Old Testament sacrifices, we're meant to be a living sacrifice. A living sacrifice.

[7 : 50] You know, I once heard someone say, the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep trying to crawl off the altar. They keep trying to crawl off the altar.

Grain stays on the altar. A dead animal stays on the altar. But a living sacrifice does not want to be on the altar. And it keeps trying to crawl off every chance it gets.

And what that essentially means is, this is something that Paul is saying, we have to do every moment of every day. Every moment of every day. You're putting yourself on the altar.

And then the next moment you're trying to crawl off. And then you're putting yourself on the altar. And the next moment you're trying to crawl off. It's every moment of every day. It's a continual

sacrifice.

So over the course of our daily lives, in essence, every choice we make, every choice you make that may seem like a tiny little choice. Totally inconsequential choice.

[8 : 48] Every choice can really be distilled down to the same choice that we make again and again and again. In this decision, am I in some way presenting myself as an offering to God? Or am I trying to crawl off the altar?

Or am I trying to crawl off the altar? Or am I trying to crawl off the altar? Or am I trying to crawl off the altar? And finally, since this is a living sacrifice, the third difference is this. This kind of sacrifice doesn't involve a physical death, thankfully.

Or maybe not thankfully. That might be good news, but it might not be good news. Because it's still a sacrifice. And a sacrifice, by definition, means that something has to die.

So if this kind of sacrifice doesn't involve our physical death, then what has to die? Where is the blood? And the thing that we realize as we sort of reflect on this and what Paul really means is, the thing that has to die, that we have to choose to put on the altar and to put to death again and again and again, is our freedom to live and do as we please.

Our sense that our lives belong to us. We have to put to death the control that we want over ourselves, our lives, our future.

[10 : 07] We have to put to death our whole sense of right and wrong. That has to go on the altar. Whole sense of right and wrong. The whole way we think our life should look, that has to be put to death.

And you know, I think many of us get stuck and stop growing spiritually because we think that we have given ourselves fully to God. We think that we're on the altar. But what we've actually done is try to negotiate a quid pro quo relationship with God.

What we've really done is to say, well, I'll do this and that and the other for you as long as you do this and that and the other for me. I will sacrifice for you, but I will only do it if you give me what I want in return.

I'll worship you if you give me the life that I really want. I'll worship you if you give me the things I want. I worship you if you give me the spouse that I want. I worship you if you'll give me the kids that I want.

And the way you know that your relationship with God is quid pro quo is how you respond when you don't get what you want.

[11 : 18] And you become enraged at God. And you say, how dare you, God? I did my part. I did everything that I was supposed to do. I prayed. I trusted in you.

Right? I was faithful. I obeyed you. I could have done all of these things and been unfaithful, but I was faithful to you and I waited for you. And still, God, after all of that, you didn't come through. How dare you? And what we need to understand is that's not sacrifice. That's the barter system. A living sacrifice means putting your life on the altar. With no expectation that God owes you anything. A sacrifice doesn't get to negotiate with God.

Doesn't get to set the terms. A sacrifice is something being put to death. So I come back to this. Is it good news or not that this is a physical death?

[12 : 22] In some ways, a physical death would be easier. It's easier in the Old Testament to come and to kill your unblemished lamb. And then to go home and live as you please.

And if you mess up, come back and kill another unblemished animal. But every moment of every day, putting to death the idea that you have any control over your life. That you have any say in what happens to you.

That you have any say in what your future looks like. That you have any say in anything. Giving that up. That's, I think, in some ways, far more painful. And when things don't go your way, realizing I don't have a right to shake my fist and to say, How dare you not do that thing for me?

Because God doesn't owe me anything. I'm the sacrifice. Arguable as to which is harder. A physical death or the kind of death to self that Paul calls us to.

So how do we do this? So kind of our second question here. Because we can't just functionally, practically speaking, sit there every minute of every day and think constantly, I'm giving myself to you, Lord.

[13 : 31] I'm giving myself to you, Lord. So how do we actually do this in day-to-day life? Because being a living sacrifice means you're offering yourself to God continually.

So how do we do that? So Paul goes on. Do not be conformed to this world. And the NIV actually says, this is one of the few places where I like the NIV better because it's a little clearer.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world. The pattern. That's because the word conform implies a pattern, being conformed by a process or a pattern.

And this is really important because this is telling us something about human nature and how we work. The idea behind that word, that we are conformed by something, is the truth that we are actually creatures of habit.

You know, we like to think that we're spontaneous and everything we do is totally unique, you know, kind of unique butterfly in the world and nobody's ever been like us. We're actually creatures of habit and we're highly predictable.

[14 : 33] And we know that because there are more and more sophisticated algorithms being developed right now that can actually predict everything you're going to think and love and do and buy, right? We're very predictable creatures because we're creatures of habit.

And so this takes that into account. And it's basically saying you're being conformed by something to something at every moment of every day.

And Paul says, no longer be conformed to this world. Over time, our routines shape and mold who we are and they shape and mold what we care about.

You know, this is not news. Aristotle wrote, we are what we repeatedly do. You know, just think about your life and what you repeatedly do. That's shaping who you are.

It's shaping what you're becoming. So we are the product of our own habits. Therefore, and here's where we connect into this passage. If you want to change yourself, you have to change more than your beliefs.

[15 : 38] You have to change more than your beliefs. And this is something that Christians, I think, have lost sight of for generations. We sort of operate with this idea that if I change what I believe, I will automatically change as a person.

No, what you'll just be is disconnected. You'll believe all of this stuff and you'll live in all of these ways and there will be no connection. And it turns out we don't care.

We're totally fine to be disconnected. Right? It doesn't bother most of us. It certainly doesn't bother me. But this is saying, no, if you want to change and grow, you have to change more than your beliefs.

You have to change the habits that shape you. You know, Jamie Smith, who's written a lot on this, says, Our ultimate love, our ultimate desire is shaped by practices, not ideas that are merely communicated to us.

We are actually shaped by practices. Thus, he says, discipleship is fundamentally a matter of retraining our desires through thick Christian practices, especially the practice of Christian worship.

[16 : 42] You can believe all kinds of things. If you want that to translate into your life, your body has to be engaged. And this is, again, where we see the centrality of our bodies and why they matter so much.

The primary currency of discipleship is not beliefs but practices, embodied practices. So people say, well, I believe in Jesus, but I just don't feel it.

Where are your feelings coming from? What are the habits and rituals and patterns and liturgies that are shaping your heart? Chances are, if you begin to look at that, you'll begin to see pretty quickly why you don't feel the truths that you believe.

So when Paul says, do not be conformed to the world, world here means a worldview that denies God's existence. This isn't saying that the world is bad or that everything outside the church is bad. It's saying that the world here refers to a mentality that is a functionally atheistic mentality. I'm living and being conformed by patterns that reject the idea that God even exists.

[17 : 51] It's a functional atheism in my daily life. So people may say they believe in Jesus and yet the habits and patterns and routines that make up their lives are functionally atheistic.

You know, so you may have a Christian who's gone to church their entire life. And yet, if they habitually read polarizing tweets and political news articles, they're not going to naturally find rest in the peace of Christ.

They're going to spend most of their waking hours angry and tense and suspicious. Why? Because of their habits. You can have a Christian who habitually eats to deal with negative emotions.

They're not going to naturally turn to the Lord in prayer under stress. Why not? Don't they know to pray to Jesus and deal with their anxiety by bringing it to the Lord?

Absolutely, they know that. But their body says, no, no, no. Here's what I've learned. I've learned that when I'm stressed and I go to the kitchen and I binge on junk food, I feel momentarily better.

[18:55] I've learned that when I'm stressed and I check out by spending an hour on Pinterest or Instagram, that dopamine makes me feel better. So your body says, beliefs, that's really nice.

That's really sentimental. That's cute. I'm going to do this. Because I've been trained to do it for years. Over hours and hours and hours. So these rhythms matter.

You know, you can have Bible verses on every wall of your house. Over every door of your house.

Yes, Bible verses everywhere. But the real question you need to be asking is not what's on your wall, but what are the habits that are setting the tone in your home?

Are you habitually overspending and overconsuming? Are you habitually staying up late working every single night? Is the rhythm, is the sense of rhythm in your home restful or is it frantic?

Are you always late for something? Are people always coming and going? Now, I mean, that's my house. That's the way mine. So this is not, that's how my house feels.

[20:00] And we have to ask ourselves, are these rhythms orienting us toward God and what is true about God? No. These are rhythms that I think are driven more by the consumerist myths of production and consumption than they are the gospel.

And I think, I think when I look at these rhythms, they are reinforcing self-centeredness rather than sacrifice. So I can say Romans 12, I want to be a living sacrifice and then everything I'm doing in the rhythms of my life are telling me you matter most.

You're the most important one in the room. That's not how sacrifice thinks. So the only possible way to offer your body as a living sacrifice to God is through embodied practices that reorient and recalibrate your heart toward the love of God and everything that is true about God.

So this is why we have weekly worship. I come here and we get, we get recalibrated here. You know, this is why we have the liturgical calendar and why we have daily practices such as the advent calendar or the wreath.

You know, you look at this and you're like, well, this is an odd, if you didn't grow up doing this, it's kind of odd. Why do we do this? Because in every way we can, we are trying to create embodied practices where we are physically doing something to remind us of what is true about God.

[21:18] Because guess what? If you don't have this odd practice in your life, you're going to have a whole lot of other odd practices like staring at a screen for hours. That's pretty odd. And at the end of the day, what's going to have a better impact on your heart?

Probably lighting a cheesy candle. I'm serious. So we have the prayer book. We have the liturgies for prayer throughout the day. We have the lectionary with daily readings in scripture.

We have weekly Sabbath, which I do believe is beneficial to God's people to observe a weekly full day of Sabbath rest.

So the point is, as we offer ourselves to God through these embodied practices over time, things will begin to change and shift. Things will begin to grow in you.

Things will begin to adjust and give way in you. And you'll realize that it's all connected. You can't sacrifice this part of your life without having to sacrifice this part of your life and this part of your life and this part of your life.

[22:20] So everything will begin to shift around. And we see in this passage a few ways that we will begin to notice, okay, this is evidence that I'm actually growing. Number one, we will grow not only in our knowledge of God's will, but in our love of God's will.

That's the first piece of evidence. If you want to know, am I growing in my faith as a Christian? Paul says, be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

In other words, growth isn't just understanding and knowing in your brain what God's will is. It's loving it. It's loving it.

It's delighting in it. It's seeing it as good and acceptable and perfect. Other translations say good and pleasing and perfect. That's really the key.

You know, the great theologian Jonathan Edwards used to say that the real test of genuine faith and spiritual revival was not only that people knew God's word, but that they loved it. They delighted in it.

[23 : 28] You know, the Psalms are filled with that kind of language. I will delight in your word. I delight in your law. I delight in your ways. That's true spiritual growth. The second thing we see, another way that you know you're growing is you're going to grow in humility and self-awareness.

All of these practices that we do are orienting your heart toward greater humility and greater self-awareness. You can't go to your knees every day or every week and confess the confessions that we use and not have to face some really hard truth about yourself.

I suppose you could, but over time, I think it'll wear down even the hardest heart. There's not a week that has gone by. I've been doing these confessions regularly much of my Christian life, you know, since I started doing this in seminary.

And there's not a time that I confess when I am not keenly aware of something that I'm confessing very specifically through the language of the confession that we use.

When I say sins of commission or omission, right, I'm thinking about very specific things that I've said or done or not said or not done. So you grow in humility and self-awareness.

[24 : 43] You say, verse 3, he says this, And what he's saying is you gain a right-sized view of yourself.

Some of us think way too highly of ourselves. No offense, but it's true. Everybody around you knows it. And some of us think very lowly of ourselves. And probably people around you know that too. Some people tend to be very, very sort of blind to their faults.

Because many of us tend to be very hyper-aware of our faults. And the gospel corrects both. The gospel says you need to have a right-sized view of yourself.

And all of these practices are meant to give you a right-sized view of yourself. Yes, it's true that I'm incredibly sinful. Yes, it's true that I have a really hard time trusting the Lord. But guess what's also true?

God loves me and delights in me more than I can possibly fathom. And when those two things come together, I am more sinful than I ever dared admit. And God's love and grace are greater than I ever dared imagine.

[25 : 47] When those come together, that will melt your heart. And all of these practices, all of these embodied practices are designed to bring those two truths together in your heart.

A right-sized view of yourself. Evidence of spiritual growth is that you begin to love yourself not for your own sake but for God's sake. And to see yourself as he sees you. Number three, the third bit of evidence that we are growing through these embodied practices is that we begin to grow in our love for other people.

In our prioritization of other people. Verse four, He's using the word body again, but in a different sense.

And you know that's deliberate. You offer your body as a living sacrifice and guess what? God takes you and then joins you to an even greater body. The body of Christ.

The church is the body of Christ. So when you give yourself as a living sacrifice to God, He then gives you to His church. The body. And He gives you gifts through the Holy Spirit to serve as a part of that body.

[27 : 03] As a necessary, vital, essential part of that body. And Paul gives a few examples here. You know, prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation.

Not extortion. Exhortation. Giving. Just kidding. Leadership. Mercy. Mercy. But there are many, many, many more. Many more gifts.

And the point is this. Christianity is not something that can be practiced alone. By design, it's not something that can be practiced alone. So a way of saying it is, you know, when you give yourself to God, you are at that moment giving yourself to God's people.

And you can't really give yourself to God without giving yourself to God's people. And there are needs in this community. Maybe only you can meet.

You know, there are hands in this community that maybe only you can hold. You know, there are particular kinds of lonely, secret, hidden suffering. And maybe you're the only other person in the room who knows what that feels like.

[28 : 07] Maybe you're the only one who's been there. And maybe that's why you're here. Maybe like you thought you just kind of found the church online or kind of, you know, got invited by a friend or kind of walked in the door one day because you were curious.

Maybe you thought that's why you were here. But maybe the real reason you're here is because God said, I need this part of the body right here for these reasons. Because there's this need and this person needs to be here because I want to meet this need.

And the way I do it is through this person. And maybe that's the real reason you're sitting here. And there are, you know, there are ministries and outreach opportunities that exist only because people have started them.

And there are many ministries and outreach opportunities and missions that don't exist because nobody has yet started them. That's why they don't exist. You know, the refugee ministry, you're going to hear a little bit more about that later in the service.

That exists only because Juliet gave herself as a living sacrifice. And said, I'm going to give myself to the Lord. I'm going to give myself to the church. And this is the way I'm going to serve. You know, we have the Antioch ministry.

[29 : 11] That exists only because Ellen gave herself as a living sacrifice. Said, I'm going to give myself to this. I'm going to give myself to the church. I'm going to give myself to starting this ministry. Because this is where I feel like God is calling me to serve. You know, we have core groups.

We have Sunday school classes. We have a tech team. We have greeters and ushers and people who are setting up and cleaning up. And an altar guild and a parish council and a healing prayer ministry. And many others that exist because men and women are saying, I'm going to be a living sacrifice.

I'm going to give myself to God. I'm going to give myself to God's people. I'm going to give myself in the ways that God has gifted me to serve. Because I understand the call of my life is to be a living sacrifice.

So as we said at the beginning, just kind of pull all this together. If you're a Christian and you're desiring to grow in your faith, your body is the key.

Your body is the key. Our faith cannot remain purely intellectual. And it cannot remain purely emotional. Our faith cannot remain disconnected from our bodies and the habits and the patterns and the rituals and the liturgies that shape our hearts.

[30 : 23] You have to engage your body. You have to adopt these habits and patterns and rituals that conform you to the gospel rather than the world. So the invitation this morning is really an invitation. Offer your body as a living sacrifice through embodied practices that reorient your heart toward God and toward God's people.

That's what Paul's saying. And if you're not a Christian and you're hearing all of this and you're thinking this is bizarre, why would someone ever do this? The key to this passage is when Paul says, on behalf of the mercy of God.

It's a response to the mercy of God. In other words, the reason that we would do this is because this is exactly what Jesus Christ did for us. The reason that we want to offer our bodies to Jesus as living sacrifices is because he first offered his body to us as a sacrifice.

And a God who loves us enough to offer his body on the cross the way he did is the kind of God that you can trust with your body, with your heart, with your life, to put yourself on the altar and let go of your future and let go of control and let go of expectations and let go of entitlement and to say, Here I am, Lord.

I belong to you now. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the joy of being here this morning.

[31 : 56] Again, I pray that your spirit would continue working in us to do what we can't do for ourselves. This is not an invitation that we can respond to in our own strength. It's something that you have to do in us, Lord.

And so I pray that you would, as we even later come forward to receive these elements, Lord, which is your sacrifice, I pray that we would come and bring our offerings to you, not just in the form of money or whatever else we might offer, but ourselves.

Because we know that that's the real and true offering that you're after, Lord. And we pray that as we come to you, we would bring ourselves wholeheartedly, not reservedly, but fully, Lord, holding nothing back.

And pray this for your glory and for our good. In your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.