

A Living Sacrifice

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. The reading this morning is from Romans chapter 12, verses 1-2. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but 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.

Good morning, everyone. I can't help but to feel overwhelmed this morning, but what a privilege it is to feel this.

Please pray with me. Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us together this morning.

And thank you for your word. Father, as we open your word together now, we pray that you would open our hearts to hear it. Help us not just hear the words, but understand what you're calling us to do with them.

[1:20] Remind us of your mercy towards us. Help us look again at all that you have done for us in Christ. And let that shape the way that we hear your call to live for you.

Lord, we pray that your spirit would be at work among us now, renewing our minds and turning our hearts towards you. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. So a couple of years ago, I went on a camping trip with a few friends from high school. We're still friends today.

It's been over 10 years now. We see each other almost every other weekend. So in all that time, we've talked about anything and anything that you can talk to people about. Except there is one topic that has almost never come up in, at the time, about a decade.

The topic of God just never came up, or faith, or anything in that region. It seems pretty impressive. I don't know if we were all trying to intentionally avoid it.

[2:28] But anyway, this trip, it wasn't long after I had sincerely become a Christian and was baptized, and I wanted to talk to them about God. So I prayed before the trip that somehow, naturally, a conversation would just turn to the big questions so that I wouldn't have to force it on them.

And that I could talk to them about God. And honestly, as I was praying, I doubted that it would happen, which seems silly now.

I thought, how's God going to pull this one off? But in his kindness, he answered that prayer, and the conversation turned that way. And we were able to talk about it and debate about it, which was wonderful.

I don't remember the specifics about the debate now, but I remember how honest we all were together. Particularly one friend, this was towards the end of the discussion.

He said, I think God is real, and I even think Jesus existed, but I would never become a Christian, because I know what I'd have to give up.

[3:45] He said, I know what I'd have to sacrifice. I've thought about that conversation a lot over the years, and particularly this past week.

I guess what stuck with me is that for him, becoming a Christian wasn't like for most of my other non-believing friends. It wasn't about whether God is real or Jesus is reliable.

It was about what following God and believing in Jesus would mean for his life. I wanted to say, in hindsight, to my friend, I didn't get the chance then, but I wanted to try and show him that what believing in Christ and following Jesus would mean for his life is far greater than what rejecting him will mean for eternity.

In our passage today, Paul shows us two options, really. Two ways to live.

One way to live. One way to live. One way to live. One way to live. This chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is a transition point. For 11 chapters, Paul has unpacked the gospel.

[4:56] He's shown us who God is, what Christ has accomplished, what that means for sinners. He has explained our sin, God's grace, justification by faith, our adoption as God's children, his faithfulness to his people.

He's shown us the many mercies of God. I'll go through a few of them now. I'll just read through three sections of Romans so that I don't lose you.

Where I think God's mercy is just so well displayed. First Romans, you can flick through or they'll be on the screen. Romans 3, verse 21 to 26. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.

Although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. There is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift.

To the redemption that is in Jesus Christ, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance, he had passed over former sins.

[6:19] It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 5, verse 1 to 5. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have a peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we have also obtained access by faith into his grace in which we stand.

And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

And hope does not put us to shame. Because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Finally, Romans 8, verse 1 to 4.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

[7:30] For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do, by sending his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. He condemns sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

There are so many more examples of God's great mercy shown to us throughout the book of Romans. There's so many examples of God's mercy in here. If you woke up today, and I can see that many of you are awake.

God's mercy has been shown. God's mercy is shown. God's mercy is shown. God's mercy is shown. God's mercy is shown. shifts from instruction to exhortation. And he begins like this, chapter 12, verse 1.

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers. He begins with an appeal. I think NIV will say, I urge you. The idea is the same. He's appealing to brothers, that's Christians who know the gospel. He's writing to believers, urging us to respond rightly to God's grace. Paul believes that Christian living is not something that should be or could be done on autopilot. He urges us because God's grace doesn't make our response unnecessary. Rather, God's grace calls forth our response. And he backs up with his appeal with a reason, a big reason. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God. Paul's inviting us again to look back over everything we've already seen in Romans. Every page has been another reminder of God's mercy.

There's a pattern throughout Paul's letters. First, he tells us what God has done. Then he shows us how God's people should live. And that is because Christian obedience doesn't stand on its own. It always grows out of truth. The gospel comes before the command. Grace comes before obedience. It's easy to reverse that order. Paul is saying, in light of everything God has done, now you must decide how you will live. Every Christian eventually reaches that point, or should. There comes a time where the question isn't just, do I believe these truths? But then, what difference will these truths make to my life? The gospel always pushes towards that question.

[10:25] And Paul's doing it here. He's saying, look at what God has done. Look at the mercy he has shown. And then ask yourself, what is the only fitting response? That's the Christian life. We're not trying to repay God's mercy. We never could. We're not trying to earn more mercy. We already

have it. But we're responding to mercy with grateful obedience.

And again, getting that order right is important. Because if we lose sight of God's mercy, obedience quickly becomes duty. But if our obedience grows out of God's mercy, it becomes an act of worship. If a parent or a spouse or a friend regularly gives their time to you, gives their energy, care and love to you, probably don't respond by, as Dave pointed out in the kids talk, you probably don't respond by thinking, well, I guess I have to repay them now.

And you respond because you love them and you're grateful for what they've given you and the love that they've shown you. Their love changes the way that you want to respond to them.

In a much greater way, God's mercy gives us a reason to offer ourselves to him. How are we to offer ourselves to him? Paul helps us out.

Present your bodies, verse 1, as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Now, sacrifices were well understood to Paul's original readers. They weren't something symbolic.

[12 : 18] People knew exactly what happened to a sacrifice. An animal was brought to the altar. Its life was given. It belonged entirely to God. That's the kind of sacrifice that Paul is talking about.

He's talking about complete surrender. And he says present. He's calling us to do something here.

He's appealing to our wills. There's a decision to be made.

He's appealing... He's asking us to willingly place ourselves before God. But he adds a surprising word. Living. A living sacrifice.

Someone observed that the difficulty with a living sacrifice is that it always tries to climb off the altar. Isn't that true of us?

Every morning we wake up with a temptation to take control of our lives again. To pursue our own kingdom instead of God's. To reclaim what we've already offered to him.

[13 : 31] That's why each day we must remember God's mercy and present ourselves again. Because our hearts constantly need reorientating toward him.

Every day we continue offering ourselves to him. It's not a one and done moment that maybe happened years ago. It's a life-long posture. A living sacrifice.

Paul explains how we are to do that. He says present your bodies. Now taken very practically that might seem very narrow. Why doesn't Paul say present your hearts?

Or present your souls? Well throughout scripture the body represents the whole person lived out in everyday life. Paul isn't limiting the command to our physical bodies.

But our bodies is where our faith becomes visible. We serve with our bodies. We worship with our bodies. We work, live, speak, suffer, endure and obey through our bodies.

[14 : 47] But God is asking for all of those things. He's asking for our whole life. Tomorrow morning some of you will sit behind a computer. Some of you will sit in lectures or in classrooms.

Some of you will change nappies. What a joy. Some of you will go to medical appointments. Paul says every one of those moments.

Even ordinary ones. Can become worship when they are offered to Christ. God isn't interested in a Sunday faith that never reaches Monday morning.

He wants every part of our life to come under the lordship of Christ. That means our work, our ambitions, our use of time, our sexuality, our words, our thought life.

Nothing sits outside of this call. Because the Christian life is no longer our own. We have been set apart for God.

[15 : 58] Our lives now belong to him. That's what holy means. Set apart. Belonging to God. And I'll point out that Paul isn't saying that we must perfectly become holy before we present ourselves to God.

If that were true, none of us could come. We come because of God's mercy. We come trusting Christ. And as we continually offer ourselves to him, God continues his work of making us holy. It's not, well, clean yourself up, then you can come. No. God says, come to me and I will continue the work that I have already begun in you.

I don't know about you, but I find that very encouraging. Particularly as someone who believed that they weren't good enough for God for a very long time. And I mean, every Christian knows the struggle and the frustration of still seeing sin present in their lives.

Paul doesn't write to perfect Christians. He writes to ordinary believers who are still being transformed. My point is, holiness isn't the entry requirement.

[17:25] It's the direction. We are not yet what we will be. But by God's grace, we are no longer who we once were.

Paul knows from experience that there is no better incentive for holy living than the contemplation of the mercies of God.

This is our fitting response. Or how Paul words it, our spiritual worship. Worship that is more than an hour on Sunday. It's worship that encompasses our whole lives.

A few verses ahead in chapter 12, Paul shows us what this looks like in practice. He gives us some examples of how we are to use the particular gifts God has given us in service of others.

I'll just read verse 6 to 8 of chapter 12. And think back with me for a moment to the early chapters of Genesis.

[18:54] Chapter 1 and 2. We're given a picture there of humanity living in God's good world. In relationship with him and serving him.

As we know, sin fractured that relationship. Turned us away from God. In Christ, God is restoring himself to us. When Paul calls our whole life worship, he's showing us what salvation is moving us back towards.

That picture in early Genesis. Lives that belong to God and are lived for his glory. I can't wait.

If we're going to offer our lives to God and we haven't already, then we have to ask what is shaping our lives?

What is forming the way that we think, the way that we live? Verse 2. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

[20:03] There's two options there that Paul presents us. Conform or be transformed. The world and the gospel tell two very different stories.

One says life is about self. The other says life is about Christ. Christ. Make much of self. Make much of Jesus. Those two stories are competing for our hearts.

I mean, most prevalently nowadays on our phones, go through social media and you'll see all these people telling you what you should look like, what you should want, what success looks like, what you should be offended by, what you should care about.

It's unlikely that after each swipe, we're reflecting on whether what we're consuming is changing the way that we're thinking about the world. It just happens as you keep taking it in.

Thinking outside of our phones, there's people around us, if you can believe it. The people around us, we're shaped by our friends and colleagues.

[21:15] Their motivations rub off on us. Their priorities become our priorities. Conformity, the word conformed means the idea of being moulded or shaped into a pattern.

It's important to note that it's a passive word. You don't have to deliberately choose to conform. You just have to stop paying attention.

Because not conforming is not just avoiding bad behaviour, but it's refusing to let the world define reality for us.

As Christians, we are swimming against the tide. And I guess my point is, if you let it, the tide will take you.

Or be transformed. The word Paul uses there is where we get our word metamorphosis. It describes a transformation from the inside out, an inward change that becomes visible outwardly.

[22:37] Conformity involves defining reality for ourselves. Transformation begins with truth. We're seeing reality the way God sees it. Conformity lets me remain the author of my own life.

Transformation means surrendering that authority to Christ. And discovering that the life Christ gives me is actually far better than any I could construct for myself.

Paul tells us how we are to be transformed, as we read on, by the renewal of your mind. Think about how every sinful pattern begins.

Maybe even think about Genesis 3 now. Before we sin with our hands or with our mouths, we've already believed something false in our minds. We've believed that sin will satisfy us.

That God is holding something back. That we'll be happier our own way. Every temptation begins with a lie.

[23:53] Transformation begins with replacing lies with truth. With allowing God's word to reshape how we think, how we see the world, how we see God.

God's word is his means for our transformation. Our minds are renewed as we sit under God's word. God's word is his means for our transformation. As we meditate on it, dive deep into it,

continually learning.

As we remind ourselves daily of the gospel, God's spirit takes his word and changes us. God's word changes us. Both in developing our understanding generally, but also how we preach to ourselves. Gospel changes. It makes us better at preaching to ourselves. As our minds are renewed, we learn to recognize what pleases God and increasingly want to live that way.

We become better able to make wise and godly decisions. Better able to love well, particularly to those who are hard to love or have hurt us.

[25:08] As we read on, Paul asserts the purpose of our minds being transformed. That by testing, you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Good and acceptable and perfect. Those aren't three categories of God's will. As if some decisions are good, some are acceptable and there are a couple that are perfect.

It describes together the kind of decision that a renewed Christian learns to recognize. That is something that is good, pleasing to God and in keeping with his wise purpose.

An example, imagine you're choosing between two jobs. Both are legitimate. Both could provide for you. But one pays significantly more.

While making it almost impossible to be involved with the church or properly care for your family or have any meaningful time to serve others.

[26:27] A renewed mind does not ask, well, no brainer, I'll go for the one that pays more. A renewed mind asks, in light of God's mercy, what would be the wise and godly way to live?

Now that's a pretty big life decision, that example. And the answer is not always very clear. So we weigh the circumstances, pray, seek wise counsel, consider God's word, and then make a decision. But the Christian life is fueled by the mercies of God. And those mercies renew the way that we see God, ourselves and the world.

after reflecting this week on what my friend said on the camping trip, I don't want to become a Christian, but I'd know, but I'd have to give up.

I understand why he felt that way. Yeah. It makes sense if you view giving your life to God through the lens of a cost-benefit analysis.

[27:49] I think that's a mistake. Let me try and show you why. First with a story about a missionary and explorer, David Livingston.

Born in 1813, he gave his life to serve Christ and in the exploration of Africa for the sake of creating access to the gospel.

He was there for 33 years over in Africa and during his time he suffered repeatedly from malaria, of which his wife also died. He was attacked by a lion, leaving his arm permanently damaged.

He endured financial physical and logistical difficulties, hunger. He spent long periods in isolation. We're talking years in loneliness. He experienced the death of several of his children.

Impressively continued his work despite years of hardship and suffering. When he returned to England in 1857, 1857, he gave an address at Cambridge University when asked about the sacrifices that he had made.

[28:57] This is what he said. For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I made in spending so much of my life in Africa.

Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blessed reward in helpful activity, the consciousness of good doing, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter?

Away with the word in such a view and with such a thought. It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather, it is a privilege.

Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and the charities of life, may make us pause. And cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink.

But let this only be for a moment. All of these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.

[30:05] Livingston, I don't think he discounts the suffering that he went through. He explains the experiences later of anxiety, sickness, suffering, and danger.

But he's speaking comparatively when he insists that all of these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us.

And I'll just point this to scripture as well. In Mark chapter 10, the young man turns away from following Jesus because he had great possessions. Verse 22 to 30. Peter realises Jesus' call for radical sacrifice in Luke chapter 14 verse 33.

Any of you who do not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. That is why in verse 25 Peter says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Now in response to Jesus Peter announces that he and other disciples have made the necessary sacrifice. Verse 28. See, we have left everything and followed you.

[31 : 22] And then what Jesus said to Peter and the others who had left everything. Verse 29 and 30. Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life.

John Piper in an article about this story said, in the bright shadow of David Livingston's suffering I could see the point of Jesus' words more readily.

following me you do not make a sacrifice. My point is with all of that as we continue offering ourselves to Christ we become people who increasingly delight in giving our lives to him.

And if you believe that God really is as merciful as Paul has shown to us and God has shown to us and if you believe that Christ really did die for you then what better response could there be than to give him our lives?

please pray with me heavenly father we have been reminded of your mercy towards us we have been reminded of what you have done for us through Christ that while we were sinners you did not leave us to ourselves but gave your son for us and so Lord help us not leave this to leave this morning simply having heard something that is true Lord help us to respond help us to take what we have heard and bring it into our own lives tomorrow morning the morning after that and the morning after that Lord where we have been conforming to the world renew our minds where we have been holding something back from you help us to surrender it where we have been living lives for ourselves turn our hearts back towards

[34 : 03] Christ Lord may our lives increasingly become an offering of worship to you and when we look back on all that you have done for us may our response simply be how great is our God we pray this in the name of Jesus Amen may may