

Living Sacrifices

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[0 : 00] Well, it's so good to have you here this evening. As Steph has said, it beats preaching into an empty room, or speaking to an empty room.

But I was just reflecting, though, that really in the times we live, you know, we could be back next week into lockdown and all that, given what's happening around the world and around Australia. So I sort of feel and have a sense that each time we gather, we ought to be quite thankful, shouldn't we, that we can gather, not take it for granted. And really, even after we can do this with more certainty from week to week, we should still be bringing that attitude of thankfulness every time we gather.

Well, do turn back to Romans chapter 12, if you've got your Bibles in front of you. A much shorter passage this week than last, but hopefully just as enriching.

Now, I wonder what it is that motivates you in life. I know many of you probably have struggled to answer that question during lockdown. It's hard, isn't it, to roll out of bed, only to get straight into your desk a few feet away and spend the rest of your day in that same place.

[1 : 14] I think supermodel Naomi Campbell once said that she never got out of bed for less than \$10,000 a day. I'm not sure how many of you would do that for less, probably, hopefully, more than most of you would.

But we don't often think much about our motivation, do we, when life is going well and things are just rather normal. But when a crisis hits or something like a pandemic hits all of us, then it sort of stops us in our tracks, doesn't it, to think, what really is motivating us in life?

And sometimes the answer to that can surprise us. We may not have been cautious about the things that are really driving us. We've just gone along, but actually, you know, deep down, it's a fear of failure, it's greed, or it's a desire to please people, as we heard, for example, with Vanessa sharing.

Or sometimes we find that our actions aren't aligned with the things that motivate us. We're so busy doing all these things when really our deep down motivation tell us that we're wasting time doing all these things that don't matter.

Well, Paul has spent the last 11 chapters of Romans showing us what ought to motivate Christians in life. He's revealed God's plan for the world. He showed the salvation, the plan of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles, that it comes only through faith in Jesus, not by works, so that Jesus' righteousness is credited to us by faith, and that all of this happens only because of God's great mercy toward us.

[2 : 57] And now, in the rest of the letter, from chapter 12 onwards, Paul turns to applying this truth to our lives. Hence, there is this big therefore in verse 1.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship.

So what is the motivation for Christian living? Well, for Paul and Romans, the answer is God's mercy. And remember how last week we saw that God's mercy is shown to all, whether it's Jew or Gentile.

The Gentiles, because they were outside God's promise in the first place, and then to the Jews, because they hardened their hearts to God until they were provoked to envy by the Gentiles and then came back.

But each, in turn, are saved by God following their disobedience, only because of God's mercy and through faith in his son Jesus.

[4 : 02] And so for me, it was so encouraging to hear Vanessa and Victoria share their testimonies tonight, because it reflected God's mercy to them, and then their faith in response to that mercy.

And so the ongoing motivation for them and for us is the same, in view of God's mercy to live for Jesus, to live as living sacrifices.

And I wonder each morning as you're awake whether that is your motivating thought. Is it thankfulness at seeing God's mercy being shown to you, that he has given you the gift of faith and trust in Jesus, despite the fact that you've done nothing to deserve it?

Is that what motivates you as you get up and get on with life? People who have been given a second chance in life often express such gratitude, don't they?

If someone survives cancer or have come from a war-torn country, they never take their new chance at life for granted, do they? Well, how much more for us as Christians to know that we've not just been given a second chance in this life, but actually we've been given a second chance for eternity.

[5 : 18] How much more should we be living our life in light of that fact? We may not have had a near-death experience, but Paul says, and he said it earlier in Romans chapter 6 and verse 23, that the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Well, that's us as Christians, isn't it? Our wages, because we've sinned, is death, but instead we've got eternal life as a free gift. So, in view of God's mercy toward us and our second chance at life, let's offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. Now, given we've worked through Exodus at church recently, many of you have been watching online, we know exactly what Paul is referring to here.

We're being compared to that burnt offering that is at the temple, which God stipulated as Israel's worship to him. It's not the sin offering that pays for forgiveness, remember how I said that, but it's the burnt offering that is a holy offering, pleasing, has got a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

It's the offering of sinners which have already been forgiven, and having been forgiven, they bring this burnt offering that is holy to the Lord. And so, likewise here, Paul is saying that we are to do it now with our bodies as Christians, meaning our whole lives, our bodies, not parts of our bodies, not just some of the time in certain areas of our lives, but all of it, not just when we're at church, but when we're at home and at work and wherever we go.

[7 : 04] Every breath we take, every move we make. You can start singing, everyone. But not the songs, but this. Is as a living sacrifice in worship to God.

Further, Paul says it's sacrificial living, isn't it? We live not to please ourselves or to pursue our own dreams, but to serve God and to please Him.

And thirdly, we're to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. That is, we're not dead sacrifices, as if we're meat plonked onto a barbecue, but rather we're living sacrifices.

Even as we sacrifice, we're doing it as people that are alive, given life, eternal. And we see that even in the Old Testament, where dead animals were offered, the people still had to offer them with the right attitude, didn't they?

God had always demanded that their heart was in the offerings that they produce. Hence, we had the Old Testament reading today. Samuel chided Saul for his worthless sacrifice because he did not offer it as much as obeying the Lord.

[8 : 16] He offered the sacrifices and yet didn't obey the Lord. And the Lord said, to obey is better than a sacrifice. I don't want your sacrifice if you don't obey me. And to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Similarly, when David sinned in Psalm 51, he said, you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it, you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. Is it that God doesn't want them?

No, no. He's saying, not if it does not come with a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart is what God ultimately desires.

And lastly, in Hosea 6, that third Old Testament reading, we hear, for I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.

And so the point is clear, isn't it? Mindless, heartless sacrifices are meaningless to God. Instead, the one who offers it must be humble and contrite, obedient to his word, truly worshipping him.

[9 : 17] And so how much more then for us as Christians? Our worship to God, our service to him, mustn't be just going through the motions, really. Turning up to church, you know, without living for God for the rest of the week.

Or just going through the motions of opening your Bible and just reading it just to say you've done it. No. We need to be reading it and really digesting it to apply it.

Or coming to church and mouthing the songs, praising him at the top of our voice, and then as we go out, never telling others about how great our God is on the outside. No.

What God demands is wholehearted worship of him through willing and joyful obedience to all that he desires. Now, is that too much to ask?

You might think. Well, of course not. Why? Because we remember the motivation. In view of God's great mercy. Remember this eternal life that you don't deserve.

[10:18] And now if our desires are there to live from him, then the next question we ask is, how can we do this? And with that, Paul moves on in verse 2 to explain.

He says, do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Living for God involves a transformation, you see.

Can you see how the world lives around you? Have a think about that. Because Paul says that's the pattern of the world. Before we became Christians, that's how we lived.

Now, a lot of people think that the pattern of the world means, oh, you know, all these bad behaviors like drinking and drugs and all these kind of vices. Well, yep. But it's more than that, isn't it?

Because the pattern of this world includes self-righteousness. It includes pride. It includes selfish living. It's all about, this is what I want in life, and I don't care what others think or feel.

[11:19] I'm just going to try and get it myself. And in fact, sometimes as Christians, we might even have prayed and sort of blessed our selfish living, haven't we? And presume that if I ask God, then this must be the thing that God wants to bless me with.

But that's ultimately selfish living, isn't it? It's the exact opposite of selfless sacrifice, which is what God requires. No, what the Lord desires is to say, Lord, not my will, but yours be done.

Well, Paul says that as living sacrifices, we are not to be conformed to this pattern of living, rather to conform ourselves to God's will. And that requires the renewing of our minds, which, although Paul doesn't say so explicitly here, requires knowing and then obeying God's word.

And here, it's a process as we go through this. If we've been living selfishly for a while, it takes a while to kick that habit. It takes commitment to stick to it.

And even when that transformation can be slow going. It's a bit like going on a diet or fitness regime. The payoff only comes at the end, doesn't it?

[12:36] Not by quitting halfway through. But again, what's our motivation to keep going? By remembering God's mercy to us in Christ.

Christ gave his life as the ultimate sacrifice for us. So now we are asked to live like him, for that's pleasing to God. And so when we get to verse 3, Paul shows us what happens as a result.

He says, Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is. His good, pleasing and perfect will. Now let me unpack a bit what it means to test and approve God's will.

It's not in the sense that we're sitting in judgment of God's will. We're not testing to see if God is right or not. And then we approve of it. You know, we're not like that driving examiner.

Testing a learner to see whether he deserves a pea plate or not. Rather, it's more like someone's baked a wonderful cake.

[13:37] And we've come to see and smell. And as we come, we see just how great it is. And then what we do is we test it by tasting it. And then we show our approval of it by saying, yum.

Or going back for more. Which is the better way to show our approval, I think. And going back for more and more and more. Isn't it? So likewise, when our minds are renewed by God, and we know and understand what God requires of us, and we know what he calls us to do in order to obey him, then we test God's will by actually living it out.

That's what testing is. We know it's good for us. We're testing it out. And then we're approving it by saying, wow, praise God, thank God, as we're applying it. That's what it means to test and approve what God's will is.

Now again, think of your own life. Is this how you think Christian life is? Or do you sometimes feel like it's a bit of a tug of war? God is pulling you one way, and you feel like you're pulling him another way.

Well, if you feel like that, I mean, sometimes we all do that. Don't be overly discouraged. But realize that this is the process of God trying to transform you by the renewing of your mind, so that you don't conform to the world, which is pulling you this way.

[15:00] But rather, the spirit is realigning your heart and mind to be in tune with God's will, which is pulling you this way. And then as you keep obeying God more and more this way, it becomes second nature.

And when that happens, doing God's will is, as Paul says, good, pleasing, and perfect. I think there's a very beautiful symmetry here.

Because in verse 1, Paul instructs us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices which is pleasing to God. And now here in verse 2, when we test and approve God's will, it becomes pleasing to us. Can you see? It's mutually pleasing, isn't it? God with us, as we obey him, and we with his perfect will. So as we obey God and live for him, we not only please him, but more and more, his will for us brings deep satisfaction.

It pleases us, doesn't it? It brings pleasure to us as we obey him. There's a deep sense of knowing that this is where we're meant to be. This is what God wants of us.

[16:10] And we take such pleasure in it, to obeying his will. And that's the irony, isn't it? We were living sacrifices, we're doing everything for God, and yet there's such great pleasure in doing it.

Where else is there such a thing where you lay down your life, you think you've given all, not for yourselves, but for God, and yet the result of it is something that is so fulfilling in your life, so enriching to you, that you don't think it's a sacrifice at all.

I think only when we live for Christ and live for God do we ever get that experience, don't we? That you can be selfless, and yet your own self is being nourished by that selflessness.

Now part of laying down our lives is living for others, and so the rest of the passage, verses 3 to 8, is all about that, where we offer ourselves to the body, that is Christ's body, in service to others.

And so verse 3 we go, For by the grace given to me, I say to every one of you, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

[17:24] Again, you know, Paul has such great insight into human nature, isn't it? Maybe he's learning from his own experience, but even when it comes to talking about serving others, which you think, you know, it's all about putting others before yourself, Paul still has to remind us about the great danger of pride.

I think he's even applied it to himself because he takes care to say it's only from a position of grace that he's instructing us, isn't he? He himself is being mindful of God's mercy to him.

And so when it comes to serving others, Paul reminds us of our common faith. I think that's why he has the phrase, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to us.

He's not saying here that some have more faith and others have less. I think what he's saying here is that we all have a common faith given to us by God's grace. No one is more deserving than the other.

Therefore, don't think so highly of yourself. And that's easy to do, isn't it? It's funny how we can think like that, even when we're trying to serve others. The danger there of thinking, oh, you know, I've been called by God to serve in this area, so it must be that I'm better than everyone else in this area.

[18:40] No, rather, God hands out his gifts, Paul says, solely on the basis of grace. The one who receives the gift are not deserving of them. But once given, we're to use it to serve others, serve the body.

And so now Paul says in verse 4 and 5, for just as each of you has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Paul says, remember that you are now part of Christ's body, the church. God wouldn't give you all the gifts. Rather, each member has a different function to play and therefore different gifts.

And each member is to perform that function so that the whole body can function together. Each member exists to serve the body and not the other way around.

And so, as a consequence, we are to use our gifts not to big note ourselves, but for each other. And so verse 6, we have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us.

[19:50] If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith. If it is serving, then serve. If it is teaching, then teach. If it is to encourage, then give encouragement.

If it is giving, then give generously. If it is to lead, do it diligently. If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. Now, this is not an exhaustive list, so don't go down and go, oh, where's mine?

It's not here. And that, again, is being sort of self-centered, isn't it? But there are a number of points that Paul makes here, isn't it? First, we are given different gifts according to God's grace.

Not because of what we've done, but solely on the basis of God's grace. Secondly, we are to use them in accordance with our faith. That is, we are to use them as a response of our faith.

We serve as believers of Jesus, responding to God's mercy. We serve as it flows out of our thankfulness and as we trust the Lord Jesus, in other words.

[20 : 51] And so, our attitude matters, doesn't it, when we serve. And so, we see those descriptors at the end. He says, if you're giving, give generously, not miserly.

Okay? If you're leading, do it diligently, not haphazardly. If you're showing mercy, do it cheerfully, not grudgingly. That is, when we serve, let's make sure our heart is in it.

Just as we were talking about with living sacrifices. Let's make sure we give our best. Now, not saying here that perfection is what is in mind, but our attitude is the thing that we need to have as wholehearted as possible so that it is pleasing to the Lord.

And so, don't have the attitude of using our gifts to show off or to be annoyed when your gifts are not being, you know, fully used and overlooked by others. Rather, it's about what's best for the body.

And conversely, as a church, as we look at one another, we ought to be looking out to see how we can encourage each other to be using their gifts to serve others. When we see someone with a gift and using it, let's affirm that.

[22 : 02] Let them use it to serve others, maybe even, instead of you. Don't hog ministry opportunities just because, you know, that's my thing, you know. I'm a preacher so no one else can do it kind of thing.

Now, if someone among you here, you know, you haven't quite worked out your gifts, you've only just started becoming Christian, well, let me encourage you not to get too concerned.

That's okay. My encouragement to you is just to start serving and then let God show you over time where He has given you gifts and where He has put you. Don't be envious of others who have gifts that you obviously would like.

That's okay. God has His own ways of working, doesn't He? The main thing is as long as we're part of the body, God has work for us to do.

So, He will give us a place in His body to serve others. He's not going to leave you out of it. Instead, I think we just get started serving wherever the opportunities might be and then we see where God leads, doesn't He?

[23 : 09] And so, friends, let me finish by going back to the question at the start. What is it that motivates you in life? What gets you out of bed every morning?

As Christians, our lives ought to be motivated by God's mercy toward us. We were disobedient, yet God sent His Son for us and gave us the gift of faith.

If we realize this, then how do we now live? I know that many of you, as I see, are living as living sacrifices.

And that's so pleasing to God. That's pleasing to me too, by the way, as I see you giving up your time, your energy to serve others, using your gifts to build others up, putting others before yourself. That's a wonderful way to live. And if you're not living like that, then I encourage you, check it out, taste, test, and see that it's good and pleasing and perfect.

[24 : 10] You see, the pattern of this world is always to be thinking about ourselves, isn't it? Our feelings, our desires, our wants, our goals. And that may seem very attractive at first, but actually, laying down our lives for God and for others, just like Jesus, our Savior, did.

That's the only way that really leads to a good, pleasing, and perfect life. So let me pray and ask God to help us do that. Father, thank you for your great mercy that you've shown to us through the gift of your Son and the gift of faith that we have in him.

Help us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices all the rest of our days. Renew our minds and help us to serve you in the body of Christ. Help us to serve others as the body of Christ.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.