

# Spiritual Worship

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[ 0 : 00 ] because there have been times where in the middle of Romans, here on Sundays, in home groups, things like that, we've had kind of theological headaches with Paul.

Do you know what I mean? Where we're wrestling through a really dense argument that Paul's making, and there's part of us that kind of goes, oh, for crying out loud, Paul, will you please just give me the bottom line?

You know, will you cut to the chase? I've lost you. Will you just tell me what I'm supposed to do? And I know that that is what some of us have been thinking because we've talked about that.

Well, if that's you, if you've been waiting all this time for Paul just to cut to the chase and tell you what to do, the next four chapters are going to be, you're going to love it. Because in the next few chapters of the book of Romans, Paul is going to give us an absolute barrage of commandments. I mean, they're just going to come from every angle. And it's not going to be particularly hard to understand, but it's going to be really hard to do. It's a bit like hiking up a mountain.

[ 1 : 08 ] If you ever hike up a mountain and you hike back down, as you're going, you think that all the hard work is going to be while you're going up, right? Don't you? You think, man, if I just get to the top, I'll be able to have lunch and a big drink of water, and then it's all downhill from here, right?

But then if you've ever been on a really strenuous hike, you go up the mountain, and yeah, it's a lot of hard work. Then you have lunch or you drink your water or whatever. And then you turn around and you start to come down, and what you find is that there's a whole bunch of new dangers. There's a whole bunch of new things you have to watch out for, and there's a whole new type of fatigue that can happen as you come down the mountain. And that's a little bit like the way the book of Romans is.

As we've come through these first 11 chapters, we've done the theological hard work, and now we're coming down the mountain. And in one sense, it's easier because we've got momentum down the mountain.

It's going to be pretty straightforward. But nevertheless, you can turn your ankle. You can do all sorts of things that are going to injure you. And as we come into this last section of the book of Romans, there's a very subtle danger.

[ 2 : 21 ] And the subtle danger, as we come into all these commandments and all these things, these duties, the subtle danger is superficial obedience, superficial Christianity.

Let me explain what I mean. It is very possible, and it's easy, to perform all the main duties of Christianity, and to go through all the, you know, to formally obey all, or at least most of the visible commandments.

It is very easy to perform all the duties of Christianity to such an extent that you impress yourself and you impress other people, but you do not impress God. It is easy to obey superficially. Because according to the book of Romans, the important thing is not merely that you obey, it's also important how you obey.

It's important that you obey, in a sense, in the right way. And Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2, our text this evening, our text this evening gives us an insight.

[ 3 : 32 ] It pushes aside superficiality and gives us an insight into the heart of real Christian obedience. What is the type of Christian practice that God desires?

What is the type of Christian obedience that God desires? These two verses give us insight here. And so what I want to do is look at these verses, and I want to point out four characteristics of the type of Christian practice that God likes.

Okay? Four characteristics of the Christian practice that God likes. First of all, first one, Christian practice that God likes is not a pursuit of God's favor, it is a response to His mercy.

Look at verse 1. Paul writes, I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, and then the key phrase, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Now, stop right there. The word therefore, and the phrase, the mercies of God, knit this section, this last section of the book of Romans, to everything that's gone before.

[ 4 : 46 ] And the point is this, friends, and this should be pretty straightforward if you've been with us for a while, the bedrock, the absolute bedrock of Christianity is the mercy of God.

Right? That should be pretty straightforward. Over the past few months, we've been looking at how Paul tells us again and again that there is absolutely nothing you can do to earn God's favor. Right? It has to be by God's grace and God's mercy alone.

The absolute bedrock of Christianity is the mercy of God, but it is also true, and more specifically true, that the absolute bedrock of Christian obedience is the mercy of God.

And one of the reasons that Paul has waited all this time to get to the section on commandments, the reason he's waited all this time to give us imperatives is this, he knows this, Paul realizes that the only way you will ever be able to obey God is when we gain a glimpse and when we receive the absolute majestic mercy of God.

And part of the reason for that is that there is no motivator that is more powerful for obedience than a clear view of God's mercy. Do you remember the story in the Gospels?

[ 6 : 09 ] You can read about it in Luke chapter 11. Do you remember when Jesus goes to dinner with the Pharisee? Do you remember that story? Pharisee, I think his name was Simon, invites Jesus over for dinner.

So Jesus goes, they sit down to dinner, and they're talking about theology and things like that, and then all of a sudden a woman walks in the room. Do you remember? And she was a sinful woman with a reputation in the city, so to speak.

I mean, she was probably a prostitute. And she walks in the room and she goes right up to Jesus and she kneels down at Jesus' feet and she takes a jar of perfume. She breaks it on his feet.

It pours out all over and she begins to weep over his feet. And the tears and the perfume mix together on Jesus' feet. And she begins to wipe up Jesus' feet with her hair.

And it causes a bit of a scene, an awkward moment at the fine dining table. And as you read the story, there's a very interesting contrast that develops between the Pharisee, Simon, and this sinful woman.

[ 7 : 20 ] We don't even know her name. Because here you've got this Pharisee who morally is just squeaky clean. I mean, he's as squeaky clean as he could possibly be.

He's like irritatingly clean. But he's stingy when it comes to loving God. And on the other hand, you have this sinful woman who couldn't be more perfectly opposite.

She has this horrific past, or notorious past at least, and yet in spite of her morally suspect past, she's extravagant in her love for Jesus.

And she's extravagant in her love for God. And Jesus sees the whole thing going on and he cuts right to the chase and he says, Simon, do you know why this woman loves?

She loves much because she has been forgiven much. The only people, friends, that truly love, that truly love God, and therefore the only ones that will ever truly do anything significant for God in obeying him are those who have seen the mercy of God for them and who have received that mercy.

[ 8 : 32 ] Christianity and Christian ethics can only ever be motivated by gratitude. Christian practice that God likes is never a pursuit of his favor.

It is a response to his mercy. That's number one. Second characteristic of Christian practice that God likes. Second characteristic is this.

This is a little bit more subtle, so listen up. Christian practice is not just about good behavior. It's about giving yourself to God in love.

Back to verse one. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies and then note it as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Now focus on the phrase living sacrifice. What is a sacrifice? You know that a lot of religions, many, many traditional religions around the world have sacrifice as a part of their religion.

[ 9 : 40 ] And different religions work the system differently, but typically, a sacrifice is when you bring some valuable gift to a deity.

It might be money. It might be an animal. It might be food. You bring something that you have that's valuable and you give it, you sacrifice it to the deity either as an expression of your loyalty, expression of honor, expression of love, or as an offering to either provoke blessing, provoke the deity to bless you or to get the deity not to be angry with you anymore.

Usually, you know, there's different iterations of it, but usually, those are the broad outlines. Now, Christianity is odd and we've talked about this in Romans. Christianity is odd because Christianity takes that whole system and it turns it on its head.

Right? Remember, we've talked about how we, none of us here could ever possibly bring a sacrifice that's worthy of God. Right?

And so, according to Romans, according to the New Testament, what God did is He provided the sacrifice in the person of Jesus Christ. And so, that's a bit odd that God is the one producing the sacrifice.

[ 11 : 05 ] But then it's even stranger, right? Because God not only produces the sacrifice or provides the sacrifice, He actually is the sacrifice. He becomes the sacrifice.

So, Jesus, as He hangs upon the cross, is fully God, fully man. God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to Him. And so, Christianity turns the whole thing on its head.

What it does, you know, traditional religion frames it that God responds to human sacrifice or to the sacrifices that humanity brings. In Christianity, it's the other way.

God brings the sacrifice and we respond to Him. Now, follow me here. In the person of Jesus Christ, God gave the most valuable thing that He could give.

The most valuable thing that God has is God. And God gave God's self to us in the sacrifice of His Son. Now, given that reality, how are we supposed to respond to that?

[ 12 : 15 ] Friends, the only response that could possibly make sense to such an extravagant gift is for us to, in return, give the most valuable thing that we have.

The most valuable thing that we have is ourselves. And that's what Paul means by presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice. It means we, responding to God's mercy, we give God total ownership over the totality of our lives in total love and total gratitude.

Now, that's why Christian practice is not just about doing good deeds. Christian practice that God likes is about giving ourselves to God in love.

And friends, there's a difference there. Can you see the difference there? It is possible to do lots of good deeds and never give ourselves to God deeply and fully in love to Him.

Let me give an illustration. This might be a little difficult for some of us. You can tell me later if it works. I want you to think about sex.

[ 13 : 30 ] Now I've got everybody's attention. I want you to think about sex in the context of prostitution versus sex in the context of marriage, particularly Christian marriage.

Now, in one sense we're talking about the same act, right? But everybody knows that behind the scenes, deeper than just on the surface.

Those two things, sex in the context of prostitution and sex in the context of Christian marriage, those two things could not be more utterly opposite. Sex in the context of prostitution is all about taking something.

It's all about exploiting something. So, and I hope this isn't too difficult for people, but, you know, the pimp and the john use sex in order to get, to take.

Pleasure, money, power. Sex in the context of Christian marriage is exactly the opposite. When two Christian married people come together, it is not to take from the other person, it is to give.

[ 14 : 51 ] And it is to give themselves to the other person. So, in the context of marriage, you give your bodies, you give your, I mean, you give everything that you are, you give your identity in some sense, you give your name to the other person, you give financially, you share your life together, you give family to each other, you give all that you are to the other person.

And that's why you can look at two acts that on the surface physically are perhaps the same thing, but their core is absolutely opposite.

and one we recognize as gross and a travesty and the other we recognize as beautiful, so beautiful that the scriptures regularly use marriage as an image of Christ's relationship to the church.

Now, why am I saying this? There are a lot of religious people who do lots of good deeds, but they do it in order to get something from God.

They do it to take something from God. Status, acceptance, heaven, money, whatever it might be. And if that is the way, if that is the motivator, if that is why we do good religious deeds, then friends, we are exploiting God, we are pimping God, we are treating Him as if He is a prostitute, and we are a stench in His nostrils.

[16:22] But, Christian practice, we will do the same deeds, we will do the same good deeds, but we will do it not to get something from God because we have already received everything that we could receive from God in Jesus Christ.

We do not do it to take, we do it as an expression of giving ourselves to God in love. On the outside, it could look similar, but on the inside, it's absolutely different.

Christian practice is not just about fulfilling good deeds, it is about giving yourself to God in love.

And so you need to ask yourself the question, why do you do the good things that you do?

Okay, third characteristic of Christian practice that God likes. Christian practice that God likes is not compartmentalized, it's comprehensive.

What do I mean by that? One of the signs of superficial Christianity is we'll end up, and every one of us does this to some extent, I think, we end up compartmentalizing our life, right?

[17:30] We end up segmenting our life, it's like all the different components of our life are put in different boxes. And on some of those boxes, there's a label saying, this is relevant to God, this is where my Christianity explicitly bears influence.

And then there's other boxes in your life, other portions of your life, where, well, it just doesn't seem like God is that relevant to that area of your life. And you don't think of it cognitive, you know, consciously like that, but that's the way your practice reveals.

So for instance, there's a lot of people who think that God is relevant to my opinions, my beliefs, my emotions, my inner life, and my private life. But God is not relevant, oftentimes, to my body, my health, my money, my sexuality, my career, my relationships.

Now, friends, that kind of compartmentalization doesn't work. Why? Verse 1, present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

The word bodies there, I mean, it just means the word body, but what is signified there is it's a comprehensive word. It is meant to include everything that we are, everything that makes us us.

[18:57] And so for a Christian, the pursuit is for us to get to the place where every box in our life is labeled with one label and that is all contents belong exclusively to Jesus and are to be used for his end.

Others of us compartmentalize our life according to time, right? So there's a lot of Christians that they'll think of it this way. I go to church on Sundays.

I go to home group on Wednesdays. I have a quiet time every day and when you add all that up, it equals I am a remarkably good Christian. And the thought there, and again, this is never conscious, but it's always subconscious.

The thought is, you know, I've spent a lot of time on God, but we forget that all the rest of the time in between is meant for God as well.

Look at the end of verse 1. This is your spiritual worship. When he says worship there, it's referring to the entirety of our life being given over to God.

[20:12] You can think of it this way. A Christian is someone who is learning how to worship God through every activity you ever engage in and at every moment you ever breathe.

And if a Christian ever comes across an activity, a portion of life that you just can't use as worship to God, then that's an activity you should not do.

You should find something else to do so that everything we're doing, everything at work, everything at school, everything with your friends, your entertainment, the websites you look at, the music you listen to, everything ultimately should be offered to God as worship.

It's not compartmentalized, it's comprehensive. Last one. Christian practice that God likes is not just about avoiding bad things, it's about preferring God over all things.

Verse 2. 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.

[21:32] Another sign of superficial Christianity is that quite often a superficial Christian will focus on the first line, do not be like this world, and will skip the second line, be transformed through the renewal of your mind.

From time to time you'll find people who, what they do is they make a list of the very, very naughty things that the world does.

and then they'll say, I'm not going to do those naughty, naughty things. And then they get pretty good at avoiding doing naughty things. And then, again, just like before, they think well of themselves.

Now, the difficulty with that one is that you, you know, you're hitting part of it. You're hitting half the verse, but you're missing the point. God has a much bigger vision than, you know, don't put your hand in the cookie jar.

God's vision for our lives, friends, is that we be renewed in our minds so that we recognize the things of God and we prefer the things of God over everything else.

[ 22 : 50 ] Let me give you an example. A few weeks ago, I was watching Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution. Has anybody watched that? Yeah. It's kind of fun. Anyways, and there was this kid on the show, a British kid, who, who, his entire life, all he had eaten was prepackaged junk food.

And that's the only food he liked. He was, I don't know, he was like seven years old, seven or eight years old. And so Jamie Oliver, you know, as he does, cooks this brilliant like baked chicken dinner with organic greens and potatoes and I was really hungry when I watched it and it's part of what kept me watching it.

And he sits it in front of this kid and the kid was repulsed by it. I mean, he was just repulsed by it.

And I mean, I could smell the thing through the TV and I wanted to eat it.

And this kid was just utterly repulsed by it. And then, I mean, he cried, he pitched a fit. And then when he finally took a bite of the chicken, you know what happened? He threw up.

He threw up all over Jamie Oliver's nice meal. Kind of was cool. But, now friends, go back to Romans chapter one.

[ 24 : 11 ] Here's this kid who, he was repulsed by what's healthy and he was attracted, preferred, what would eventually kill him.

right? Romans chapter one, do you remember, we, um, Paul, Paul says that natural humanity without God's grace, we have become futile in our thinking.

We have been given over to a debased mind. And one of the things that that means is that just like this kid, we can be presented with the God and the things of God and all that will eventually lead to life and we're repulsed by it.

There's something wrong with our minds. We're repulsed by it and at the same time we can see sin and all the things that will lead to death and hell and we're attracted by it and we love it.

There's something wrong with our minds. Now, back to Jamie Oliver. A few days later, a few weeks later, they came back to this kid and he had been renewed in his mind.

[ 25 : 18 ] What had happened was, here he is and he's just devouring the baked chicken and I was jealous. But the thing was, what had happened is he had come to first recognize good food and then prefer good food.

And that's exactly what verse 2 is all about. God, by his spirit, comes to the Christian and renews our minds so that we can recognize, discern the things of God and then not only can we recognize them, we prefer them over everything else.

And friends, when that happens, when that work of transformation happens, you won't want to be conformed to the things of this world because you'll see that they lead to death. So it's not just about ticking off don't do naughty things, it's about being renewed so that we desire God above all other things and we see the beauty of his son Jesus Christ, we see the beauty of following God and we want to pursue him.

Do you see the difference? Christianity isn't just about avoiding bad things, it's about being renewed so that we prefer God over all things. And so that leads us, we need to end, but how does the spirit do that work?

And I'm not really going to talk much about this, but it brings us back to the very first thing Paul said, by the mercies of God, friends, the Holy Spirit renews our minds so that we love the things of God by presenting before us Jesus Christ, the gospel of free grace, chapters 1 through 11, the Holy Spirit sets it before us and as we see God giving all that God has to us in Jesus Christ, our hearts will be moved to give all that we are to Him.

[ 27 : 13 ] And when we give all that we have to Jesus Christ, we will want to do the things of God, not in order to provoke God to be nice to us, but because we've received all things and we desire to give Him all things.

And then we'll desire not to be compartmentalized, we'll want God to saturate every aspect of our lives and every moment of our time. and then we will be brought back not wanting to be conformed to the things of this world, but we'll be driven to continually pursue greater and deeper and more profound transformation of our mind so that we may see with greater clarity the glories and beauty that is Jesus Christ.

Friends, that is the basis of Christian practice that God likes. let's ask Him to do it. Let's pray. Let's pray.