

Spiritual Worship

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] together in the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps you'd turn with me to the passage that we read there, Romans 12 verses 1 and 2. And I want to ask the question to begin with, what is real Christian worship?

That's something of a hot potato question in the Christian church in my part of the world. It's a common thing to hear people say, well I want to go to a church where the worship is really good. But what is worship? I looked for some help by going on to Google and I put in Christian worship and pressed the button.

And the first page that came up was the BBC religion page. And it said this, Christian worship involves praising God in music, speech, reading, prayers, sermon and various holy ceremonies. Well I guess that's a fair description of what goes on in many churches most Sundays in different styles. And it wouldn't be wrong would it to exclude that as an aspect, one aspect of our corporate Christian worship.

[1 : 09] But as we'll see in this passage, none of these things really are what Paul talks about. When he tells us what real spiritual worship, as he calls it, what it is, what it looks like and feels like and sounds like.

And the rest of the book of Romans really from this point on is all about worship. Worship as faith in the flesh.

What the faith of the gospel that he's been expending for these 11 chapters or so, what it really means in the cold light of day in our day to day lives.

True worship, Paul teaches us, is the obedience of faith, lived out in response to God's great mercy and to the praise of God's great glory.

As Christians in our individual lives, as churches in our corporate life and even as citizens in our life in the world.

[2 : 10] Paul teaches us in these chapters that real worship is not about ceremonies, it's about character. And real worship only begins with our character, our whole lives being shaped by God's transforming grace.

And that's what's crystallized for us really in this headline, these two verses that introduce all these chapters that follow. I want to focus on these verses this morning, just on the three simple headings.

First of all, as you'll see in verse 1, Paul tells us that real Christian worship is about being living sacrifices. We're not to offer things to God, but ourselves, says Paul.

True worship, he says, is life lived in response to God's perfect and complete work of grace in us. Therefore, verse 1, I appeal to you in view of the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

In a sense, it's an unnecessary appeal, isn't it? Because the hallmark of somebody who's really understood the gospel of God's grace, his great mercy, the hallmark of that person is that they spontaneously will want to offer everything that they have to God.

[3 : 35] There are people who want to sing, all for Jesus, all for Jesus. This my song will ever be. That's the nature of true faith. It's the very opposite, isn't it, of the so-called worship of the religions of the world.

They're all about trying to win God's favor, win God's blessing through sacrifice. I'll never forget when I was in India a couple of years ago, going into a shop, and it was the eve of Diwali, the Hindu festival.

And the Brahmin priest was going around, all the little shopkeepers, putting out little idols in front of them, doing their puja, their worship with them. And these poor people looked thoroughly miserable.

As they gathered, offered these things to these idols, and handed over large wadges of cash to this Brahmin priest. And off he went to the next shop with a big smile on his face.

That's the worship of religion. Not very different from the pseudo-Christianized forms of that we sometimes see on the television, is it? People extorting money from hapless people in order to win the blessing and the prosperity from God that they desire.

[4 : 40] But no, says Paul, real worship is not that at all. It's not offering things to God that will lead to God's blessing. It's a life of response to the rich blessings that God has already abundantly poured out upon us by his mercy.

Now, God's mercy, God's compassion, has been a great theme all the way through this letter to the Romans, especially in chapters 9 to 11 that I guess you've just finished studying. We're told there, aren't we, of the God who bears patiently with so much rebellion, so much rejection, because he's determined, as Paul says in chapter 9, verse 22, to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, that he's prepared in advance for glory.

Mercy, says the end of chapter 11, both for disobedient Jews and disobedient Gentiles, like most of us, who were enemies, and yet have been already reconciled to God by the death of his Son.

I guess, if you're like me, there'll be people in your life that you would gladly do anything for. I can think of many people like that in my life.

It's not because I have to, nor is it because I feel some great burden, some debt that makes me do it. Because I want to. I would do anything for them, because they've done so much for my life.

[6 : 12] They've taught me so much. They've given me so much. All the kindness, all the love that they've shown to me, just wells up in my heart and makes me want to do everything for them.

It's the nature, isn't it, of kindness and mercy and compassion, that it elicits in us a loving response, a desire to offer back.

Well, how much more, says Paul, with God's great mercies. True worship is just a natural response of a life that's touched by God's perfect work of grace, his work for us, his work in us.

And that's the sacrifice, Paul says, that God delights in, that is acceptable or better, well-pleasing to him. It doesn't require any paraphernalia.

It doesn't need any ceremonies. God just wants you and me. And the response of love from our hearts to him. The language he uses here in these verses is very much the technical language of the Old Testament.

[7 : 20] Worship, presenting holy sacrifices and so on. At the beginning of chapter 9, Paul speaks about all of these things, the true worship, as being the great privilege of Israel, God's chosen people.

Do you remember? Do you remember? To them belong the covenants, the law, the glory, the worship. But now, you see, it's no longer only to them, Paul says. That's what I've been telling you all the way through this letter.

All these blessings now belong to all the true family of Abraham, by faith. And the true worship God desires and loves is simply living out by faith the life that you now have through faith in Jesus Christ. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice. He's echoing the words that he used back in chapter 6. Do you remember?

He tells us that because by faith we are united to the Lord Jesus Christ, present yourselves to God, he says, as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.

[8 : 29] What he's saying, you see, is those who are dead in their sins, they can't worship God. It's impossible. Only those God has brought to life can worship him. But he has brought us to life.

He's made us alive in Jesus Christ. And so we, you and I, we can be real worshippers. Living sacrifices.

Whose lives are a response to God's great grace. The response that pleases God, our Heavenly Father. But in case we get carried away with that idea and think that there's something ethereal about this, something mystical about this, it's all about feelings.

No, no. Paul makes very clear it's quite the opposite. It's rooted, says Paul, right here on planet Earth, in our real bodily life as Christian believers. That's the second focus.

Real worship, Paul says, is about a life surrender. It's not only life lived in response to God's perfect work of grace.

[9 : 37] It's a life lived, says Paul, utterly realigned to God's perfect world of glory that is to come. Note that for Paul, spiritual worship is bodily worship.

Present your bodies, he says, as a living sacrifice. And what he means is that we're to be transformed in our whole earthly existence from now on, in all of our faculties, all of our members. Just as he put it in chapter 6. Just as you once presented your members, your bodily life, your faculties, as instruments of lawlessness and impurity, now, he says, present your members as slaves to righteousness.

No longer, you see, are our bodies to be slaves to sin. They're to be slaves to our new master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

See what he's saying? Real Christian worship means living a real life in the real world, but with a real difference. Visibly different, tangibly different in our worship.

[10 : 46] That is, in the things that we value, in the things that we treasure, the things we devote ourselves to as worthy of our devotion. The word worship comes from worth-ship. We devote ourselves to what we think is worthy, what is worthwhile, what we consider ultimate.

Now, back in Romans chapter 1, if you can remember that far, Paul speaks about the worship of the world, doesn't he? They've exchanged the truth of God, he says, for a lie, and worshipped and served created things, and the creature rather than the creator.

And above all, he tells us what we all know. We worship ourselves more than anything else. And all of that, Paul says, is given bodily expression in our human life, in our culture, in our energies.

Not least in dishonoring our bodies, in all manner of sexual immorality. Of course, Romans 1, as you know, is very explicit about that. But also in social immorality, in envy, and greed, and violence, and gossip, and so on.

All of these things, says Paul, is the antithesis of true worship of God. But real worship will therefore mean that our lives are turned all the way back, the right way up again.

[12 : 00] We're no longer, says Paul, conforming to the things and the thinking of this world, but to the world to come. And that means that a Christian who is a real Christian worshipping God, their life will be as different as night and day from the ways of this world.

In fact, at the very end of chapter 13, which is like a bracket that holds chapter 12 and 13 together, that matches these verses, Paul uses exactly that language.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, he says. What does that mean? You cast off the works of darkness, and you put on the armor of light. You walk no longer in the darkness. And drunkenness and sexual immorality.

And quarreling and jealousy and all of these things. The exact reversal of what he describes of the world in chapter 1. It's a life realigned.

No longer living for self. No longer living for this world, but living for the glory of God. And for the world that is to come. That's what true worship is, says Paul.

[13 : 07] So you see, what that means, friends, is that you can come to church and have a lovely service like this morning. You can sing. You can hear a sermon. You can take communion. But if you go off after church and spend the rest of this week carrying on that affair with somebody else's wife, whether it's real, or whether it's just in your mind, or whether it's these days on the internet as a virtual affair through Facebook or whatever else it is, well, you're not worshipping God, are you?

Or if you sing songs all day on a Sunday, whether it's old songs or new songs, whatever you like, but you go off and you spend the whole of your week quarreling, being envious with your workmates and your family, and endlessly craving after the material things of this world, well, you're not worshipping God, are you?

Not real worship. Not the worship that pleases God. No, real worship is real, in the flesh, bodily surrender.

It's the obedience of faith that's visible, and that's audible in our members, in what we say, in what we do, in where we go, in what we spend our money on or don't, in who we spend our time with. All of these things. That's spiritual worship. That's our reasonable service, which is another translation of these words. It's very hard to translate it, the word there, reasonable or spiritual worship.

[14 : 38] It's what gives us our word logical. It's right thinking. If you're right thinking, then bodily life surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ is how you understand worship.

And that comes, says Paul, from wholly renewed thinking. Christopher Ashe, our colleague at Cornhill in London, puts it very well. Listen. Offered bodies, he says, comes from changed minds. For the mind is the parliament of the body, where feelings are felt and assessed, and options considered, and decisions made, and affections are determined. You see, our new life in Christ means that we're living under a new parliament.

We live in a new realm for a new age, and therefore, we conform to a new rule. Don't be conformed to this world, this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

But you know, and I know very well, that living realigned to God's perfect world of glory that's coming, and to which we belong, that living that way is very, very hard.

[15:47] It's a struggle. Because we still live, don't we, in this world's flesh. And by nature, it's so easily conformed to the thinking, to the values, to the ways of this present evil age.

When did you last have to practice to be jealous? How many of you had to train your children how to be disobedient and unkind? We don't in Scotland.

Men, how often do you have to practice and persevere at being tempted by pornography? Well, ladies, how often do you have to work hard to learn how to be envious of other women's clothes, or figures, or homes, or husbands, or whatever it is?

Do you? Don't let this world squeeze you into its mold. That's one translation of don't be conformed. But it will do, won't it?

All day, every day, through the television, through advertising, through our culture all around about us. Unless we daily refuse to allow our minds to be shaped by this age.

[16:57] Instead, as chapter 8 says, instead, by the Spirit, we are putting to death the deeds of the body and allowing the Holy Spirit to realign our parliament to control our lives with the policies of the world to come.

That's spiritual worship, says Paul. It's walking daily in newness of life, as he puts it in chapter 6. It's serving in the newness of the Spirit, as he puts it in chapter 7 of Romans.

We're worshipping God when the Spirit of God is daily renewing our minds and turning our whole thinking back the right way up, instead of refusing and resisting God's perfect rule.

Instead, God's Word and His Spirit are teaching us deeply and personally in our own experience not to resist God's will, but to rejoice in His will and to see that, in fact, His way is good and well-pleasing and perfect, not our own way, which actually only leads to disaster.

In other words, the Spirit renews our minds and opens our eyes to see that real worship is a living sacrifice of life's surrender, but to a loving sovereign, not to a despot who wants to harm us, but to a gracious and good God whose commands are for our blessing, for our life.

[18:22] true worship is to live our lives ruled by God's perfect will of goodness. By nature, you see, we suppress that truth, don't we?

We exchange the truth about God that He is, in fact, a loving God, a good creator whose commands are good for us. We exchange that truth for the lie that God wants to deprive us and stop us having what's good for us and what we want.

And we say, no, we won't listen to that. We'll go our own way. We'll decide our way. Romans 1 tells us, doesn't it, that God gave human beings up to that way of thinking, to that autonomy and self-rule.

But it goes on to show us the terrible, terrible results, doesn't it? A chilling description of the world as we know it. But that is inevitable when you exchange truth for lies.

But for believers in Christ, that wrong thinking has been turned around again the right way up. Because we know and we love God's true worth. And so we worship Him.

[19:27] We love Him. We love and serve His commands. And we see that they are full of beauty and goodness. As the old hymn says, His commandments become our happy choice.

And we see, as Paul himself said in Romans 7, that God's law is holy, not hateful. that His commandments are holy and righteous and good. We delight in them in our inner being even though, yes, we recognize that it's a struggle in our flesh, in our bodies.

That our bodies constantly want to rebel against God's good commands. But here's the thing, friends, the more we do walk in newness of life, the more we test and approve, as verse 2 says here, how good and how well-pleasing and how perfect God's will is, the more we understand that to be true.

I use the ESV as you do, but it's a poor translation here in verse 2 where it says discovering or discerning God's will. Paul's not talking here about guidance. He's talking about us discovering for ourselves the real beauty and the health of godliness as we walk in God's ways and not in our own ways.

The psalmist says to us, doesn't he, taste and see that the Lord is good. But we resist that thought so often we naturally don't believe it.

[20 : 48] We think God's commands are burdensome and onerous. But as we walk with Him, as we test and approve in our own experience the truth, we see more and more that His ways are good and right and healthy and well-pleasing to us as well as to God.

That's what James says, isn't it? God's perfect law is the law of liberty. It liberates our lives to real health and to real joy.

One of the colleagues in your prayer book tells us that it's His service that is perfect freedom. And you know that's true. Especially perhaps if you've been recently converted to Christ, you know still freshly in your experience the transformation that's taken place.

Once you were a slave to sin, but what fruit were you getting at that time, Paul says? Things that just make you ashamed now. But now, as you follow the way of the Lord Jesus Christ, you know what a change has taken place for the better, for the good.

Maybe it was for you a very real radical change from some of the things Paul describes in Romans 1 and again in Romans 13. Drunkenness, addiction, sexual promiscuity, jealousy, anger, hundreds of other things.

[22 : 12] But whatever the specifics, the difference is that once you pursued these things and now you hate them. It's a great struggle of course. Of course it is. Often.

But friends, that struggle is the very evidence that God has turned your life upside down and set you against the way of the world and facing the glory of heaven.

I don't know if you've ever struggled through the London Underground at rush hour time going the wrong way against the traffic with a suitcase. I was doing it just last week. You get a terrible battering.

But friends, that is like the transformation that God has put in us as Christian believers. Sometimes it feels desperately hard, doesn't it? There's a great personal sacrifice and yet at the same time there's a fullness of great joy, isn't there?

Even going against the crowd. Let me tell you friends, there's joy in that not only for you but for God himself.

[23 : 20] It's well pleasing to him says our text when we live like that. Every time you say no to the ways of this world. Every time you say yes to the spirit of the Lord Jesus leading you against the ways of this world and in the ways of the glory of heaven.

God, our Heavenly Father, looks at your life and what he sees is the image of his holy and perfect and beautiful son, the Lord Jesus being formed in your heart and the heart of God our Heavenly Father himself swells with pride and with joy as he sees the work of his son bringing many brothers and sisters to glory as you walk with him.

Friends, that's real worship. Saying no to this world and saying yes to the leading of the spirit of God bowing the knee to his command and gladly offering yourself as a living sacrifice to him and it pleases the heart of God.

If that's so, let me then urge you with Paul to go on in view of the mercies of God presenting your bodies day by day as a living sacrifice holy and well pleasing to God.

But that is your spiritual worship. Let's pray. Lord, help us we pray that our minds and our bodies may be molded and shaped by your spirit in your ways to reflect the glory of your son, our savior, the Lord Jesus Christ in whose name we pray.

[25 : 29] Amen.