

A Living Sacrifice

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Date: 08 October 2017

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[0 : 0 0] 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.

Well, may God bless his word. Well, we can honestly say that having come to Romans chapter 12 now, we have come through the sort of perhaps most difficult part of Romans of 9 through to 11. But the difficulty, I think, in chapters 9 through to 11 is a different kind of difficulty than the difficulty that we now experience in chapter 12. The difficulty in chapter 9 through to 11 is sort of an understanding. Some of the things you have to take in, accept, and believe, and rightly believe are a steep learning curve for the Christian. But now we come into Romans chapter 12, it's a different kind of difficulty. It's the kind of difficulty that we've just sung. I surrender all, but will you? I mean, it's a marvelous song.

It's an absolutely beautiful song. But you've just sung, I will surrender all. Can I hold you to that? And will you like to hold me to it? In other words, I really believe that if we're not going to do it, we shouldn't sing it, even if it is a great song. But I mean, imagine for a moment exactly what you have committed yourself to this evening, that you're going to surrender all. And now ask yourself, what do you think that looks like? Well, suddenly, you're making exceptions already, and exclusions already. And then you play the old, well, I'm only human card. And then after that, you think, well, everyone changes slowly. And sure enough, there becomes a whole list as reasons not to surrender all. I think it's the most appropriate song for the two verses that we have read, because the difficulty is different. The difficulty now is actually surrendering all. The difficulty now is actually to be a living sacrifice. And that is incredibly difficult, incredibly rewarding.

But the reward comes at a sacrifice. You are to be, as God says here, a living sacrifice. So this is how Paul leads into it. Romans 9 through to 11 means that we have already learned a few things that are absolutely crucial. One of them is that without God's mercy, nobody has a future. Okay, unless God is merciful, nobody has a future, period. The second thing that we learn, generally, is that we become like what we worship. And therefore, if what we worship is not God, the triune God of Scripture, then we are becoming like something else other than the triune God of Scripture. So our worship has to be absolutely spot on, as we saw in chapters 9 through to 11, the problems that God's people had in worshiping Baal and others. Their idolatry darkened their hearts, darkened their minds, and God just set them aside. They were the natural branch that were cut away, and we were grafted in.

And so now we come to Romans chapter 12, which is a natural follow-on. And it's a natural follow-on because it is a wonderful conclusion to everything that Paul was taught up to now. But at the same time, it's a great summary for everything that Paul is about to teach. So these two verses, in some way, are like the hinge between the frame of the door and the door itself. Okay? So if you imagine Romans 1 through to 11 chapters is the frame of the door, and you imagine Romans 12 through to 16, the end, is sort of like the door itself. These two verses here are the hinge, the bit that kind of holds both of those sections together. To put it absolutely simply for us, we can read it this way.

[4 : 55] This is what God has done, and this is why God has done it. Okay? This is what God has done, and this is why God has done it. So we said this right at the beginning of Romans, but I'm not expecting any of you to remember. If you do, great. The question should not be, what has God saved me from?

The question should always be, what has God saved me for? Okay? Okay, the question is not, what has God saved me from? Okay? Because a lot of people don't want to go to hell, but that's not the issue. The issue in salvation is what God saves us for, and what God saves us for is I surrender all. A living sacrifice. That's what God saves us for. That's why the difficulty here is a greater difficulty, not because it's hard to understand, but because it's so demanding on our life. Okay? It requires so much of us. In fact, it requires, as the hymn rightly says, all of us, all of us. So here's the summary. Remember that Paul is writing to a church, and the church, hence by the name of the book, is in Rome. He asked the church to consider to remember the mercies of God. We've already seen that without God being merciful, nobody has a future.

Now, the moment you understand God's mercies in your life, the automatic response is that you present your life is a living sacrifice, and this is the only true form of worship. In other words, what Paul was saying is God doesn't accept any other kind of worship. Okay? I want you to think about that for a moment.

God only accepts this kind of worship. The picture in Amos is true, because it's true, of God putting his hands over his ears when the people come into church to worship him. He doesn't want to hear their prayers, and he doesn't want to hear their singing. And you've got to ask yourself the question, why not?

Isn't that what we're meant to do? Well, to put it in a blunt way, God has seen them throughout the week, and then he sees what they're like on Sunday. And he takes into consideration what they're like throughout the week, and realizes that there's no way they can come on the Lord's Day, and their singing, be worshipful, or their prayers, be worshipful. So, to put it simply, God listens to some of you sing, but not necessarily all of you. God listens to some of your prayers, but not necessarily all of your prayers. That doesn't mean all of your prayers, that means some people, not others. Why is that? Well, because the psalmist says, whenever a person regards iniquity in their heart, God doesn't listen to their prayers. We think, well, that's just a psalm, we can ignore it, God will surely listen. No, no, God is to be worshiped, and he's to be worshiped properly for this simple reason. We become like what we worship. The reason why worship has to be so specific, and the reason why knowledge of God has to be so clear, is because you become like what you devote yourself to. You become like what you surrender all your life to, and that's exactly what Paul is saying here. Paul understands that the subject of being a living sacrifice is an oxymoron. Paul understands that everybody else understands that when you mention sacrifice, sacrifice is always accompanied with death. Paul understands that when Christ was sacrificed, he didn't live, he died. And so Paul is asking us to be a living sacrifice, which is something difficult to get our head around, but what it means is this. You live dead to yourself. You live for Christ, not for yourself. You live with a song beating in your heart, I surrender all. I surrender all.

[9 : 03] That's why the difficulty here is a different kind of difficulty than the understanding difficulty that we needed or had in chapters 9 through to 11. He goes on to say, do not be conformed to this world, and the confirmation, or rather the conforming that happens in this world is always external.

Why is it that the things that constrain us in this world always come down to the type of car you drive, or the type of house you live in, or the type of clothes you wear, or the sunglasses, or the hat, or the shoes, or whatever they are? The conforming that happens in this world is social in its pressure.

There are social norms. There are peer pressures. They are clothes. They are fitness. They are what your body shape looks like. They are all of these things. Do not be conformed to your world. Why?

Well, simply, that if you're absorbed in the social pressures that are then shaping you to be like everybody else in the world, then you cannot at the same time live sacrificially. You cannot surrender all because you're accumulating all. So the conforming here that Paul says stay away from is a social conforming. It conforms you externally, and so this is why you're quite happy to live with a paradoxical, I believe this in my heart, but externally I'm accumulating all. I'm not surrendering all. Okay, I can understand how people can be absolutely sincere in their conviction that they love Jesus, and this is why we saw earlier this morning that Jesus describes love for him as obeying his word. So Jesus wants to show you that what happens in the heart will happen externally, and what Paul is saying here is the same thing but in the opposite way around. Don't be conformed externally. Don't let the world shape you. Then he says rather be renewed or be transformed by the renewal of your mind. In other words, that true transformations always happens from the inside out. It always happens in your heart and in your mind, and that's how you change. Right, so what is the purpose of prayer meetings? What is the purpose of Bible studies? What is the purpose of this evening? Well, it's to renew your mind. Okay, why? Because if we're to be here this evening to worship God in spirit and in truth, because that's why we're here, at the same time, in order for that worship to be right before God, it has to come out of a renewed mind.

It has to come out of a renewed heart. It has to come out of someone who can provide something to God that is acceptable, that is good, that is perfect. We have to do what God wants to be done perfectly. We are not to go through the motions, and it's easy to go through the motions. We can just attend the meeting and not attend the purpose of the meeting. So, you know, I don't want to suggest anything, but it is possible, isn't it, that to notice somebody who's done something for you, and they've not put any thought into it. Perhaps it's your birthday, and they've not put any thought into the card that they've given you. Perhaps they've even given you a card that says, with sympathy, on your birthday. They just pulled it off the shelf. Can you imagine that? I've seen things quite similar to that, right? No thought, and we are surrounded by things being done in the world, and even in the church, where little to no thought is going into it. Paul says, when it comes to God, and it comes to the worship of God, that's not acceptable. Okay, a great deal of thought, in fact, so much thought, it has to be out of a renewed mind. Okay, so worshiping God in spirit and in truth happens through being renewed on the inside, so that our outward expression of singing and praying and gathering is acceptable, because if it isn't, it's not acceptable. It's as simple as that.

[13:10] So he then goes on to say, and this is where he sort of summarizes it, that discernment is necessary. You need a renewed mind to be able to tell the difference, and true biblical discernment is not the ability to be able to tell the difference between black and white. Anybody can tell the difference between black and white. Even colorblind people can tell the difference between a black sheet of paper and a white sheet of paper. The discernment needed here for the Christian is the ability to be able to tell the difference between white and off-white. Okay, you're being renewed to the point of fine distinctions, of specifications. You're able to understand what is acceptable before God, and what is unacceptable before God. You're able to understand in your own life whether or not you are surrendering all, or whether or not you've only just convinced yourself that you are surrendering all. You're able to make fine distinctions, and why should we do this? So that we are able to discern what the will of God is. And if we need to know what the will of God is, then the only way we can know it is out of a renewed mind. So the Christian life means starting all over again.

That's what it means. The moment you become a Christian, you're effectively starting all over again. But you're starting all over again with everything that God needs to give you, because he's given you it, in order to live life properly. In order to have a life that is completely acceptable before God. So our heart needs renewing, our mind needs renewing, and this means that worship does not come naturally. If our minds needs renewing in order to worship God properly, then this means we don't worship God properly naturally. We don't get it right all the time. We're learning as we do it, and we ought to learn quicker in order that it be done better, more often. And so let's not think that we can get worship right and everything else wrong. That's not the way that it works. Everything changes at the same time. The more our heart changes, the more our mind is renewed by God's Word and His Spirit, the more we're likely to worship God properly, because we cannot worship God properly left to our own devices. It just doesn't happen. So here's a few considerations this evening. Some things to be considered, some things to be learned, and some things to be lived. So the first thing, verse 1, the mercies of God. Paul makes it very clear that the Christians here in this church have received the mercies of God, and that's the reason why they are Christians. Now he's already said that

God is not a God that needs repaying, okay? When God gives, He gives generously, okay? And He's not to be paid back, because you could never afford the cost anyway. But God is a God who hasn't received anything from us that He needs to pay us back either, okay? So the position that we're in before God is one where we receive everything, because God has everything, and we can't give anything to God that God hasn't already got. So God doesn't need it, in effect. He doesn't need us to give us anything, because He gives us the very thing that we think we are giving back to Him, even our life.

So the mercies that Paul is speaking about here is something that mustn't be understood as something you need to repay. I appeal to you, therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. That bit is not a repayment.

You're not to read that as a repayment. The trouble is, is that you can read that as a payment if you see the mercies of God only in the past tense. If you see this as the mercies only referring to salvation, then the danger you're in is reading it like this, that God has been good to me, in fact, He saved me, now I must live this way. And what you're engaging is, is a spiritual transaction.

[17 : 33] You're saying, effectively, because God has done this for me, I therefore now must do this for Him, okay? Because God has showed me mercies and brought me to Christ in salvation, to Christ and experience salvation. Because God has done all this for me now, I must present my body as a living sacrifice.

But that's not what Paul is saying, because if he was, he's effectively saying, God needs repaying. Your Christian life is not a repayment for salvation, okay? Let me say that again. Your Christian life is not a repayment for salvation. You obeying God is not a repayment for God saving you. You loving God is not you repaying God for God saving you. That's a mistake. Rather, we're to understand the mercies of God here as past, present, and future. Remember what he's already taught us. Without God's mercies, nobody would have a future. When Paul asks us to consider the mercies of God here, he's not just talking about the day we were saved, he's talking about today. The only reason you've made it into today is because God's mercies are new every morning. And the only reason you've made it into today, that is you yourself in this day, is because God's mercies are new to you every morning. In other words, what Paul is saying is this, that the reason you are alive, the reason you are able to present your body as a living sacrifice, is because the mercy that you receive today is for that purpose.

The mercy you receive today is so that you can present your body as a living sacrifice to God. You are not presenting your body as a living sacrifice to God for the mercy you received in salvation, as though you're paying God back. No, no, that's not what's happening. This isn't a repayment scheme. I'll be good because God saved me. That's a works righteousness. That sounds very pharisaical. What Paul is saying here is that the mercies you've received in salvation, you continue to receive today, and you will receive tomorrow. And so, in the light of God's mercies, I appeal to you on behalf of God's mercies that you are receiving right now that you live the purpose of the life that God has given you. And that purpose is to be a living sacrifice. That purpose is to be wholly devoted to God. In other words, this isn't about repayment. This is about fulfilling the purpose of the life that you have and the life that you have today. There's only one reason why I would make it into tomorrow. There's only one reason why you would make it into next week, and that is because God is merciful. Without God being merciful, nobody has a future. So, don't understand this as...

Don't understand this as anything else other than purpose. Okay? The purpose here is for you to be this way because that's what the mercies of God is for. You're not to be this way in order to sort of thank you, God, for being merciful. That's not what's happening. So, we move on then to living sacrifice, and then, of course, acceptable worship, or spiritual worship, or as J.B. Phillips translates it reasonable worship. Reasonable because it comes out of a transformed mind.

What he's saying is that when you realize that the mercies of God are with you each day and every day, you can't help but then present your life to God as a living sacrifice. In other words, you won't use it for something else. You won't use your life for something else. Now, there's the idea behind being a living sacrifice is one that's a little bit difficult to convey because in one sense, you're speaking of death, and in another sense, you're speaking of life. It's one of those oxymorons.

[21 : 54] But the point that Paul is putting across here is something that will slow down dramatically in a minute because he understands the difficulties of living life sacrificially. How difficult is it to do?

The argument is incredibly difficult. It needs to be done, but it is incredibly difficult to do. This is why we need a renewed mind because unless we're thinking biblically, we will not live biblically.

We will live, but we will live any way we please, but we will not live biblically. And if we're not living biblically, then we're not worshiping God. And therefore, our life is not acceptable to God.

It's neither holy, perfect, or good. And that's the problem. So don't be conformed to this world with external social pressures. Rather, be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That's how you make it to being a living sacrifice. When we were saved, it does not mean that we are automatically a sensible worshiper of God. Let me say that again. When a person is saved, they are not that age in their Christian life. If a person is saved at 30 and they have the maturity of a 30-year-old, that when they're saved, that doesn't make them a 30-year-old Christian.

It makes them a 30-year-old person who's just been born again. And therefore, they're not sensible in their worship of God. It's something that has to be learned. What we do is we tend to merge the two lives together. As if one life is actually worthy of the new life that we have. As though it counts.

[23 : 42] As though, you know, I did 20 credits in this university. I did 20 credits in that university. I did 20 credits in this university. And surely that must count to my degree at this university.

Well, in university work, yeah, fine. But in the Christian life, no. The Christian life is new. It's not the old one. It's not a continuation of the old one. The old one ends and the new one begins. And so this is something that we need to learn. And the first learning lesson is don't be conformed to the old ways, but be transformed through worship. We've already seen that if you worship God incorrectly or you worship an idol, you will become like what you worship.

What Paul is saying to us here is that we must worship God out of our renewed mind because we're to become like God. And we will become like what we worship. The whole reason why God wants us to worship God properly is so that we can become like God. That's the whole reason. There's no other reason.

If we're to become like God, like God wants us to be, then Paul knows at the very heart of that transformation, it is to worship God properly. We're not just to go through the motions. Now, Paul brilliantly explains it this way. In Romans 1, this is what you have. You have false worshipers worshiping idols. They are unbelievers. They have exchanged the glory of God for worthless idols, for images of gold, silver, and any other type of stuff that will fade away. Okay? They have become false worshipers. But through the gospel, Romans 5, through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, they are then transformed into true worshipers, Romans 12. So how does a false worshiper become a true worshiper? Well, they become a true worshiper through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the mercies of God. So the gospel, if you want to put it simply, is this. It is the transformation of a false worshiper into a true worshiper. That's what it is. You read Romans carefully, or not even carefully, just read it as an overview, and what you will see is this. The transformation of false worshipers into true worshipers through the mercies of God. And the mercies of God is Jesus Christ.

You are to be transformed to be just like Jesus. Now, I think, I really do believe, that one of the reasons why there is so much inappropriate worship of God is because God's name is used, but it's not God that they're actually worshiping. It's a God of their own imagination, or a God of their own thinking. I think a lot of false worship that's even happening in churches comes down to the fact that believers are neglecting the renewal of their mind. In other words, we've all seen it where people who have a little ding-dong, one person thinks it's acceptable, and the other person doesn't.

[27 : 00] And the same thing happens between people and God. Different people think that different things are acceptable. Why is it the case that you can go into some buildings, and they're dirty, after one cleaner A has left it, but then you go into the same building when cleaner B has left it, and the cleanliness is a whole different standard?

Well, for the simple reason, people have different standards. Well, God has standards, and the renewing of your mind is to meet that standard. So as we come to worship God in spirit and in truth, we do so to the standards of God.

Here's the other thing that Paul does, which is quite sort of frustrating for me, but it's something that has to be said. Paul never, ever, ever grows tired of repeating himself. He understands that repeating himself to a Christian is exactly the same of a carpenter sanding the same piece of wood over and over again out of its rough state into its smooth state. Repetition gets rid of the rough edges in order to produce the beautiful piece of furniture.

So repetition in teaching of the church is to do exactly the same thing. It is to get us out of the false means and methods of worshiping God incorrectly into the true and beautiful way of worshiping God that is acceptable.

That's why repetition happens. The reason we are meant to hear the same things over and over again is exactly for the same reason that a piece of wood is to be sanded in the same place over and over and over again. I actually think, tongue-in-cheek perhaps, that Paul was tempted to go outside of one of the local churches and bang his head against the wall for at least a couple of hours just to take a break of trying to get through to Christians.

[28 : 56] I actually think it would have been a lot easier. And he would have come away with a far less, worse headache than what he had if he only stayed in the church. We all know how difficult it is to get through to someone who thinks or doesn't think when you know better.

And it is the case that even in the church and in the home and in society at large, some people know better than others. And there is nothing more frustrating than the person who knows better trying to get through to the person who doesn't.

And that person not even wanting to know better in the first place. I think it would have been a holiday for Paul to go outside and bang his head against the wall. I think he would have had a nice week off in comparison to trying getting through to some believers.

So here's the exhortation as we close. Don't be conformed to the world. Don't be conformed to the world. Rather, be transformed to Christ.

And the way to be transformed is through the renewal of your mind, inside to the outside. And then you will live a life where you surrender all. Then you will live a life that is sacrificial in exactly the way that it's being explained here.

[30 : 13] Then you will be able to discern what the will of God is, what is good, acceptable, and perfect. And you'll notice the distinction here in verses 1 and 2.

So if our worship, verse 1, is to be acceptable to God, then we need to be able to discern what the will of God is, because that's acceptable. So it takes a renewed mind to be able to live sacrificially in order for our life to be acceptable and in order for us to know what the will of God is.

But here's the problem that we run into. We know that when we've received a present and we don't know what it is, we be polite. So somebody gives you something and you go, oh, I've never seen one of those before, because you have no idea what it is.

And you have no idea what to do with it. So you say to the person, you know, thank you very much, but what do I do? And they say, well, I was on a holiday and I saw, and this is what you do, and they show you.

You think, all right, I've got it now. Wonderful. However, when it comes to new life in Christ, this is what most believers end up doing. They think, I've had one of these before.

[31 : 26] We think, because we've had a life since the day that we have born, when Christ gives us a new life, it was like the old one. I know what I'm doing because I've had one of these before. That's a mistake.

No, that's a big mistake. Because you're making no distinction between the life that God has given you in Christ and the life that you didn't have or the life that you had outside of Christ.

They are two different lives, completely different. And here's why. If it is possible that the world and the people in it knew what to do with their lives, properly understood, then everyone in the world would be worshiping God.

But they're not. And if everybody in the world is not worshiping God, then that's a clear indication that people in the world don't know what to do with their lives. They don't know.

Fine, they get nice jobs, they go nice on holidays, they have all these other things. But if life is meant for the worship of God and people are out in the world not worshiping God, then they don't know what their life is for.

[32 : 31] And so it's a mistake to think that if you have a new life in Christ, I've been here before, I've had one of these before. No, you haven't. No, you haven't. When you come to Christ, it is a learning curve.

It is a steep learning curve at times. It is a long learning curve. It is slow and often painful. I can promise change to every single one of you because God's words promises it.

But I can promise it only in the context of it being slow and often uncomfortable. But it will happen. When God saves a person, it may be a surprise to you what that person actually becomes.

So I'm going to explain it to you as I close. The person that is saved becomes truly human. Because the true human in the Garden of Eden was the man and the woman created by God without sin who worshipped God.

To become a true worshipper is simply another way of saying that God is making you back to becoming a true human.

[33 : 41] Real humanity is humanity connected in relationship with God just like it was in the Garden. And so what we see here is simply this.

The transformation of you being a false worshipper into a true worshipper through the mercies of God Christ Jesus and through your participation by the renewal of your mind in order that your worship of God would be acceptable, holy, and perfect before God Almighty.

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