

All Roads Lead Here: Living Sacrifices
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Psalm 51:16-17; Mark 8:34-38; Romans 12:1-2

Our final Scripture reading is from Romans 12:1-2. This is the living and active and trustworthy Word of God. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

What motivates you? Most of us under retirement age get out of bed every morning and head to work – and sometimes the job itself motivates us, but really it's the paycheck, or at least the fear of what life would be without it. We might be motivated out of excitement and curiosity – we pay for a copy of that new novel or a ticket to that new movie to see what the big deal is, in hopes that we'll enjoy the experience. Sometimes, we're motivated out of compassion – to help in some way with the hurricane cleanup. Sometimes, we're motivated out of anger – we see something that's not right and we take steps to change it. But we all need motivation, something that's going to keep us from just staying under the covers all day.

This week, we'll start looking at what Paul wants us to be motivated to do and why. For 11 chapters, he's taken us through riches of theology. He's explained why humanity is doomed without faith because of our constant choice to disobey God's ways clear in creation. He's shown us there's no way to earn salvation, and no one who gets around the condemnation of not being able to follow the Old Testament law.

And we've learned that through Christ, salvation is not only possible but guaranteed for all the elect who put their faith and trust in Him. Paul has even shown us how the Jewish people are not permanently cut off from God but can be brought back to Him through the grace shown to us through Jesus Christ. He ended that section with a doxology, a song of praise to God for all His wonders. Paul has just reached the summit – so what happens when we get to the top of the mountain? We learn our calling, what all we've learned is motivating us to do and to be.

So let's dive into the text itself. Paul writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers...” Let's stop right there for a moment. “Therefore” tells us that what Paul is about to teach us for the next several weeks on the Christian life does not live in isolation from the theology he's spent 11 chapters on. Bad Christian practice usually comes from bad theology. If we don't understand who God is or who we are in relationship with Him, we're going to have a really hard time acting in obedience to Him. That's why being in Bible study, in Scripture study, in prayer, is an incredibly important part of the Christian life. It also explains why merely living as good people isn't enough. We must have a solid foundation on God's Word and a solid relationship with Him in order to live rightly.

Next phrase: “I urge you, brothers.” Paul knows what he’s going to tell us is going to be hard to carry out. The Christian life is not a cakewalk. But neither is it merely a suggestion – a “hey wouldn’t this be a nice way to live” sort of thing. The word “urge” here in Greek means literally to beg, but it also means to encourage. He wants us to follow Jesus wholeheartedly by living like Him, and so Paul pleads with us – what I’m about to tell you, take it at face value.

And he tells us not as a superior, even though he’s an apostle. He calls us brothers. We might think this is sexist, that he isn’t talking to women, but that’s not it at all. Paul and Christianity are very aware of women and honor them repeatedly. Instead, he’s calling those he’s speaking to, the elect of Rome, and indirectly us, part of his family. In God’s Kingdom, all of us from different places, different races, different backgrounds, different languages, we’re made into one family through Jesus. He’s appealing to us to obey God’s calling not as servants or as underlings but as family members.

And why should we follow Paul’s urgings on how to live? We do it “in view of God’s mercy.” We’re never the ones to make the first move. We aren’t calling out to a God we think might be there against all hope and living a certain way in hopes that He might hear us and respond. No, God has already set salvation before us. He has already accomplished everything necessary. The past 11 chapters have shown us that God has shown us incredible mercy. Despite our waywardness, our fallenness, our sin and rebellion, God has chosen in His compassion to save us by faith alone, faith given to us by His grace alone.

When we live as Christians, it’s always in view of God’s mercy. Nothing else is compelling enough. Nothing else will bring us through the hardships of living for God alone except the mercy of God being front and center in our minds. When I try to lose weight but I don’t have a clear reason for it in my mind when I go to the fridge, it’s easy to eat whatever I want. When I want to save money but I have nothing I want to save for in mind, like retirement, I’m not going to set that aside when there’s so much I could waste it on now. If you are having a hard time actually living obediently to God’s Word, it’s probably not that you aren’t trying hard enough. It’s simply time to refocus on God’s mercy and to move forward in faith.

So what are we urged to do? Two key things. The first, Paul says, is “to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- this is your spiritual act of worship.” Let’s break this down. What is it to offer your body as a living sacrifice to God? Remember that sacrifices were given to God in order not only to atone for sins, to say “we’re sorry,” but also to show our gratefulness to the Lord, to say “we’re thankful.” To offer our bodies as living sacrifices isn’t related to our sin – Christ’s sacrifice on the cross once and for all removed the sins from all His people. Instead, it shows our thankfulness for what God has done.

To offer our bodies means that it’s our whole self – we aren’t just thinking about God, we’re not mentally agreeing that we believe what we’ve been taught about Jesus, but that our person is now given over to God and His purposes. To say we’re living sacrifices is to show that something is different from the normal scheme of sacrifice. In the Old Testament, whether you sacrificed a bull or sheaves of grain from your fields, it was completely burned up – it was dead, it had no further use. In comparison, as living sacrifices, we give up ourselves, and yet we still live. Not only do we live, we grow in the very ways we want to learn to be – in faith, joy, love.

For living sacrifices to be holy means that they are distinctively made for God. “Holy” means “related to God,” but it also means to be “set apart for sacred use.” That means that our calling is to be uniquely and exclusively for God’s use. This involves a fundamental change in the way that we think and act. What would happen if we were to start our days, instead of thinking, “What am I going to do today,” we asked, “What would you, God, have me do today?” That’s how we truly worship Him spiritually.

Now the vast, vast majority of the time, God is not going to speak to us in a readily apparent way. He’s rarely going to give us commands like “go and wait for a homeless person to come by at 22 and Hayes and give them a \$20 dollar bill.” But when we make ourselves living sacrifices for God, it means that our will comes last rather than first. We start the day and live the day looking for ways to serve God and please Him rather than ourselves in our actions, our thoughts, our words. We do our jobs and our schoolwork and our tasks, but we check in with God and keep His purposes and plans in mind. We evaluate our entertainment and relaxation not by our greatest pleasure, but by asking, “How does this thing bring me greater joy in God?”

This is very tough, and it doesn’t come quickly, and it doesn’t come easily. But we can do it. The thoughtful pursuit of God takes time, but it’s just like any other skill. You have to work at it. You have to practice it. And you have to practice being set apart for God. So little of our time is set apart for God that we have to work at it, just like we would learning an instrument or specifically taking time to get to know a new friend. This is not something to worry about, to fret if we’ve done this right. Just like an instrument, you don’t start off playing like a professional. It’s the continued work towards the goal that matters.

Now our living sacrifices are not only to be holy, but to be pleasing to God. This might be even more important than the word “holy.” Being an offering pleasing to God is another step. The history of the Israelites is full of them not obeying God fully. There were points in their history when most of the Israelites didn’t make sacrifices at all – it was so bad that the priests who got a portion of some of the sacrifices were starving. That didn’t please God, obviously.

But at other points in Israel’s history, the Hebrews made their sacrifices; they brought their offerings to the temple in Jerusalem. Yet their offerings weren’t pleasing to God because they were made in the wrong spirit and attitude. People gave blemished lambs; they gave the worst of their flocks, not the best. Or they made their sacrifices without repentance. They practiced injustice towards the least in their society, they hurt one another, they stepped out on their wives, and then they made sacrifices thinking it would make everything OK with God, and then they just kept on sinning like nothing had happened.

God wants us to offer ourselves to Him willingly, completely, and openly. We don’t do it to impress God, and we don’t do it in the thought that we can keep our private sins going if we publically confess to Christ and act like Him. We are committing to a whole transformation, not just any one part. This is our daily worship. And this is hard. And when I say these things, I say them as a fellow companion on the journey. We will make mistakes and fall along the way. God does not want us to clean up our lives and then follow Him because it will never happen. We follow Him and He cleans our lives up. What matters is that we desire to be right with God, that we desire to let go of sin, and we come surrendered to what He would change in our lives.

Paul continues: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The language Paul uses here is literally, “don’t be shaped by this age.” Don’t conform to the norms of this world order, this present life. When we look at the era that Paul was talking about, as he described it in Romans 1 and 2, it’s very similar to ours. The same sins, the same corruption, the same greed, the same injustice, the same violence, the same lust – it was all there before. It’s all here now. Human nature without God really doesn’t change. We are still fighting the same fight, against the temptation of short-term pleasures with long-term consequences for us and for others.

As we attempt to do what Paul commanded here, we just have to look at one big question: does my life look like everyone else’s life? If someone could see into every square inch of my day, does it look like the unbeliever who lives across the street? It’s not just, do we watch the same shows and read the same books? Because we might get something very different out of those. It’s more.

Do I live above reproach? Do I find ways to get out of paying my fair share, or do I give generously and cheerfully to what God is doing around the world like we’re told in 2 Corinthians 9? Do I read and look at things that make me lustful – and it’s different for different people, for men and women, but you know what tempts you – or do I agree with Psalm 101:3 that says, “I will set no vile thing before my eyes?” Do I grumble and complain and make life miserable for others, or do I show the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5:22-23 – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”? And do I live with integrity – do I practice these things when no one else can see? Again, just like we said before, it’s hard, it won’t come in a day, but the more we practice non-conformity to the ways of this age, the more easily they will come.

The second part is linked to the first – “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In English the words “conform” and “transform” work together almost poetically, but the Greek word here is *metamorphousthe* – the very same word that we use as “metamorphosis,” like the changing of a caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. The wonderful change that God works in us happens as our minds are renewed.

So what does it mean for our minds to be renewed? It’s right there in the word – made new again. Our minds under the curse of sin are darkened; we don’t think properly. Our minds get filled with all sorts of dark and cruel and evil things. We all know that our minds gravitate to things we aren’t supposed to think about – because what happens if I tell you right now not to think about a pink elephant? What’s on everybody’s mind right now? Pink elephants.

There was an old programming acronym called GIGO – Garbage In, Garbage Out. It means in software programming that the only way to get a program to work properly is to write good code for it. That’s how our minds work. If we put in junk, we’ll get junk out. When correcting the Pharisees in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, Jesus says, “It’s not the food that someone puts in his mouth that makes him unclean; it’s what comes out of him, his words and actions, that make him unclean.” We need renewed minds.

And again, God is the one who is the renewer and transformer. Yet we do play a role here. God saves us utterly; He puts faith in Christ in us and He brings us to put that faith into practice. We don't save ourselves or choose Jesus out of the goodness of our hearts. But once God saves us, we do participate in our sanctification, in that change that God works in us. God works as we do things that participate in that recreation of our minds.

Paul encourages us in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- *think* about such things." That's how we renew our minds. It's not just burying our heads in the Bible ten hours a day, though we need to be reading it daily. It's keeping our minds on godly things, on things that are true and right and good, on things that are pure.

That may mean changing our watching and viewing habits. It may mean little changes or great big ones. It may mean being willing to stop some things we do right now. I've had to stop watching some shows I liked because they ultimately weren't interested in anything I needed to have in my head. It may mean eliminating friendships that are impure. It doesn't mean that we eliminate contact with the world or to avoid any kind of storytelling. The Bible itself is full of stories that show truthfully and brutally the reality of human sin and its consequences. The question for the relationships, the stories, the entertainment we have is, is it ultimately redemptive? Is it helping me grow closer to Christ, or is it ultimately rejecting the good, the true, and the pure? These are questions we can learn to answer – and the more we do it, the more our minds will be renewed into the form God wants them to take.

And what's the point of this transformation, this renewal? Paul says, "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will." This does not mean that we'll have insight into the future, that God will give us a crystal ball as to what He wants us to do, who to marry, who to befriend, where to go, what job to take. No, when our minds are renewed, we start seeing Scripture clearly. We start seeing God's heart clearly.

When an unrenewed mind reads the Bible, it sees the Biblical accounts incorrectly. Some people think it's naïve; others think it portrays God as mean-spirited; others think it promotes weakness – after all, a lot of people think that "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible, when in fact the Bible repeatedly tells us the exact opposite. An unrenewed mind looks at the commands of God and says, "No way I'm doing those things (or not doing those things)!" The unrenewed mind rebels at the thought that there is a creator God who has the right to tell us how to act and who to be.

But the renewed mind starts to love God for who He is as He portrays Himself in the Bible. Not who we want Him to be, not some version that is more acceptable to us, but God as He is. Our thoughts and minds and hearts become transformed as our minds start to clearly understand our magnificent God, who holds both love and justice in His hands, who is perfect in all His ways. Once that happens, when we read God's will in Scripture, we test it and find that His ways are good and His words are true. We find that God's plans are good, pleasing, and perfect.

There's much more to come in the weeks ahead, but the thrust of what Paul is saying here is this – give yourself over to God. Not bits of you, not some of you, but all of you. Do it not out of compulsion but a true desire to worship Him. Work to become different, better, kinder, more thoughtful than the world around you. Turn to God daily in light of the mercy He's shown you. And God will reveal Himself to you, and you will know the all-encompassing love that He has for you as His son and His daughter.