

Romans: A Call to Give Yourself to God

Romans 12:1-2

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 12, as we continue our series of Romans. Paul is going to make a grand declaration about the first principles of Christians living. He's going to issue a Christian manifesto on living the Christian life. You can't get more practical or theological than Paul is here. For Paul, Christian living is a theological matter. If you don't understand the truth of grace, then you're not able to live the life of grace, and the life of grace is grounded in the truth of grace. So, Paul having told us so much about the truth of God's grace, the sovereignty of His grace, the mercy of God, the free justification of God and so many other of these grand truths in Romans 1 through 11, now comes here in Romans 12 and begins to flesh out for us grace in the Christian life.

For much of the rest of the book, he's going to be showing and telling us what grace produces in the Christian life. Now, this is not new news. You remember all the way back at the end of Romans 5, he had already told us that grace reigns in righteousness and that one of the goals of grace was to produce holiness, to produce righteousness in the life of those who are transformed by that grace. In Romans 6 and 7, he talked about how that looked a little bit. But, as was typical for Paul, at least in the book of Romans and Ephesians and Galatians, and some of his other books, he often concentrated on the theological and laid the ground work and in the second portion of his book turned to Christians living concerns, or we might say, to ethical concerns, or behavior concerns in the Christian life. So he does here in Romans. Let's turn our attention then to God's word in Romans chapter 12 verses 1 and 2.

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And so not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Amen. This is God's word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank You for Your word and we sense the significance of what Paul is saying to everyone of us. So we ask by Your spirit that you would grip us by the truth of Your word and change us by it, encourage us by it, strengthen us by it, this we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

These are two small, but hugely important verses in which Paul lays down the first principles of Christian living. He states in these two little verses at least six truths that are vital for the living of the Christian life. He first of all tells you that the basis of holiness is God's mercy. The starting point of the Christian's life is God's mercy. Then, successively, he walks you through this call of holiness and he reminds you that the call to holiness means a life of whole life sacrifice, that it means a whole life worship. That it means a godly non-conformity. It means an inside out transformation and it means knowing and doing the truth of God, each of those things. I'd like to walk through those things with you briefly.

First of all notice Paul's words, therefore I urge you brethren by the mercies of God. The basis of the Christian holiness that God is calling us to, in the whole of the second half of this book, is God's mercy. Paul is calling us to live for God, to love God, to obey God, to delight in God's word; to delight in God's will, to delight in God's law, to live it out because of the mercy of God toward us. So that Christian living, Paul says, is founded on our having received grace and on our understanding grace. Paul is exhorting us to obedience to God because of what God has done for us. He says, in light of God's grace and mercy, you do this. You be a living sacrifice, you give yourself as a sacrifice for God in view of the mercies of God, you do this.

This is vital for us to understand at the outset. The Christian life is not, do this and live. It is, I have given you life, now do this. So, doing is transformed. It is not something whereby we purchase acceptability with God. It is that whereby we express our gratitude for the grace of God as well as manifest what God's grace designs to accomplish in us. God's grace not only has the goal of seeing us justified before Him and accepted and accounted as righteous, it has the goal of making us to be righteous.

Calvin, you may remember if you're read his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, calls this double grace. God wants us to be acquitted and declared righteous, but He also has the goal of one day standing us before Him, perfect. He begins that labor now. It never ends in this life, we may wish that it did. It never ends in this life. It's an ongoing project, it is never complete in this life, but its goal is that we would, not only on that last day be declared righteous, but that we would actually be righteous as we stand before Him through the work of His grace and mercy.

The Apostle Paul wants you to understand that all His calls to obedience must be set against that backdrop of what God has already been done, or you'll be entirely confused, you'll be tremendously discouraged and some of you will become resentful. If you think that what Paul is saying is, "That if you'll just obey,

and if you'll just obey well enough, God will love you," you'll probably either end up rejecting Christianity, or you'll end up clinging on to some kind of Christianity, but you'll be angry with God all the time. That's not what Paul is asking you. He's not saying, just obey well enough and God will show you His mercy. He's saying, God's already shown you His mercy in Jesus Christ. In light of that, give yourself as a living sacrifice. Love God and obey God and love His law and live the Christian life because of His mercy to you.

That's the first thing that he's saying in this verse. It's not just something that Paul is saying in passing. Everything else will be warped if you don't understand what he's saying there. "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God," are the first words out of Paul's mouth in the second part of this verse and there is a reason. There is a reason, because our living for God is because of His prior mercy to us.

Secondly, notice the next phrase. What does he urge us to do? He urges us to present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God. So, he's telling us this call to holiness that he's issuing here means a whole life sacrifice. Christian living, Paul could say in another way, means dying for Christ.

Now, we don't live in a culture where people are regularly offering animal sacrifices or even libation sacrifices and other types of ritual sacrifices. That doesn't go on in our culture. We're not familiar with it. The people that Paul was writing too knew very well the typical practices of sacrifice, so something of the shock of what Paul is saying would have hit home to them. They would have been used to putting something else up on an altar to sacrifice and suddenly Paul says, "Climb up there yourself and give yourself as a sacrifice to God." It would be like Paul is saying, "Here is my evangelistic campaign theme, 'Die for Jesus.'" Now, you're expecting something more uplifting. Something more positive, like, *Here's Life* or *I found it*, or *Change Your World*, or something like that. That is something that would draw somebody to an evangelistic campaign. Positive, uplifting, *What's In It for Me* kind of theme.

Here is Paul's theme: Die for Jesus. Now you're seeing why he had to start off by, "I urge you in light of the mercies of God." The Apostle Paul is calling for us to give everything for Jesus Christ. To put ourselves on the altar and to give up everything for Him. You know, salvation is the free gift that costs you everything. The Apostle Paul is looking for whole life sacrifice from Christians and he stresses that in the very words that he uses. Isn't it strange that he says, "I want you to present yourself, I want you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice." Paul is not saying, "All I want is your external you. You know, you can keep the internal stuff, I want the external you. I want the body and the actions that the body can do." No, Paul uses that to make it clear that he is interested in more than a disembodied spirit. He's not interested in simply promoting your giving yourself in your inner world to God; he wants the whole of your world given to God, so he uses this language of giving your bodies as a living sacrifice.

If I could be crass for just a moment and shock you with a phrase. It's almost like Paul is saying, "Don't give Jesus your heart, He wants more than that." My friends, that's a standing issue for evangelicals today, because there are a lot of people who want to give Jesus their hearts and they don't give Jesus anything else. They want to live their own way, they want to act their own way, they want to have their own priorities, they want to give Jesus their hearts an hour or two, at most, a week. The rest of themselves and the rest of their lives they want to keep under somebody else's rule, their own. The Apostle Paul is saying, "Don't give Jesus your heart, He wants more than that. He wants all of you. Give Jesus all of you, die for Jesus. Give your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God."

John Calvin understood that. He understood that in a very intense and personal way. He once wrote in the *Institutes* these words, "We are not our own, therefore let not our reason, nor our will sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own, let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own. In so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we belong to God. Let us therefore, let us live for Him and die for Him, we belong to God. Let His wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We belong to God. Let all the parts of our lives accordingly strive toward Him as our only lawful goal."

Beautiful words, powerful words, and you may think, "Well, that's real nice, but he never had to do the things that I'm having to do." I want to say that you can say this about John Calvin's Christian testimony, he lived that particular truth. He had been run off by the congregation in Geneva. He pastored them for just over two and a half years. They got tired of him and they ran him off. He went to Strasbourg and he took up a charge with the French speaking congregation there and those people loved it. They absolutely loved it and he loved the ministry, he was growing, and he was fellowshiping, with friends in the faith. They were having a major continental impact for the Reformation. Then he received a letter in the mail from the congregation in Geneva saying, "John Calvin you are needed back here in Geneva". He writes to his friend, I think it's Beza and he says to him, "When I received that letter, I would have rather died than go back to Geneva, but I am not my own. I belong to God and therefore that is where I am going."

The Apostle here is calling on us to realize that salvation is the free gift that costs us everything. That Christian discipleship means giving the totality of ourselves to God. Paul goes on to expand on this again at the end of verse 1 and he calls this "Your spiritual service of worship." He goes on defining what he means by giving a whole life sacrifice by talking about whole life worship.

What's his point? This is your spiritual service of worship. His point is this, Christian living, Christian service, Christian worship is not a one or a two or a three hour a week activity. It's a twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week

activity, it's a whole life activity. In other words, the kind of worship God wants from us is whole life worship; it's all of life worship. Worship isn't an activity confined to Sunday morning or evening. I don't mean by saying this to downplay the importance of corporate worship at all. It's just that God wants His worship in all of our lives, in the priorities that we choose, He wants us to be worshipping Him. In the restraint of our own sinful habits, He wants us to be worshipping Him.

Derek Thomas just shared with me a letter this afternoon that was incredible convicting because it told a story of a friend of ours who is a minister, he's been over preaching in Latvia. He was robbed and he wasn't robbed on the sidewalk. As he went into his house, a man burst through his door, held a knife to his head, blindfolded him, stuffed a rag down his throat, and put him on the floor. The man thought he was going to die right there. As he was on the floor, he tells us he thought, "You know, I had this knife and it was poking at my back in my spine and I thought I could die at any moment and it's always been my practice that when I experience pain in life, to think of the pain that Christ experienced for me. So, I began meditating." He was on the floor for forty-five minutes experiencing this thing, he's meditating on the pain of Christ, the suffering of Christ on his behalf, the sovereignty of God, the mercies of God to him, while he's being robbed. What was he doing? He was worshipping God. In all of what? There was no corporate worship service call for that hour, but he was worshipping God with his mind, with his heart while he was being robbed.

The Apostle Paul is saying, that's what I want from you, Christian. I want a Christians who is a twenty-four hour, seven-day a week worship machine. You are always thinking about glorifying God, you're always thinking about adoring God and in every mundane event of life, or every extraordinary event of life your agenda is to be a person who is worshipping God.

Fourthly, the Apostle in verse two goes on to say some negatives. Paul is willing in his commands about the Christian life to say some 'do not's'. You might think, "That's not good for Paul to be negative. There are so many negatives out there," but it's realistic friends. You've got to have some 'do not's' in a fallen world and here is Paul's first 'do not.'

Do not be conformed to this world. In other words, Paul is calling us to a godly nonconformity. Now, this isn't some sort of a sixties radical subversive thing going on. This isn't just nonconformity for the sake of nonconformity. This isn't deciding, "Ok, everybody else in my culture has really nice china so I'm not going to have really nice china." That's not what Paul is after here. Paul is talking about a godly nonconformity. He's talking about your life being based on divine norms not ruled by the culture around you. You're not dominated by the *mores* of the society around you. You, in your living, have God's will uppermost in your heart and mind and behavior. Not the prevailing social norms, but God's will. Conformity to this world and to its way of thinking and behaving is the great problem of nominal Christianity.

Now, the good news is, nominal Christianity is dying in America. In probably in another thirty years, it will be almost dead. The bad news is, in our part of the culture, in the Bible belt, it's still big. Nominal Christianity is big, and so you run into disconnects all the time in talking to professing Christians. Like a young Christian who came to me and said, "Well look, I want to get married to so and so." "Well, tell me about so and so." "Well, she's very intelligent and she's got a great job and we've known one another for a long time." "Tell me about her church and her spiritual life." "Well, she's not a Christian." "Ok, you are a professing Christian right? Grew up in the Presbyterian Church right? You're engaged to this person and she's not a Christian, she's not a professing Christian, she's not a member of a church, and you want to marry her. Is that right?" "Uh-huh." Ok, what's wrong with this picture here? It happens all the time.

A friend of mine who has an office right next to the abortion clinic on Northside Drive says that one of his habits is to look at the bumper stickers on the cars that go into the abortion clinic. You'll see bumper stickers like this as they pull in to the abortion clinic, "Take your children to Sunday school next Sunday, they need and deserve it." "Prayer changes things" or maybe even, "Come visit us at First Baptist Church," or First Pentecostal Church, or First Methodist Church or whatever church they come from. In fact, he was telling me one day, that he sat with a man outside the abortion clinic who was a minister who was reading his Bible and who had brought his granddaughter to have an abortion. Where is the disconnect here?

Don't be conformed to the world. That is what Paul is saying. Paul is looking for Christians whose mind is not double. It's not dominated by the prevailing thoughts about what's acceptable around them. It's dominated by what God says in His word.

He goes on to say how that happens in the next phrase and that's the fifth thing I'd like to point to you. He points us to this inside out transformation. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." This call of holiness involves an inside out transformation. Christian life flows from a renewed inner man. It's brought about by a recreated mind and heart under the control and influence of the word of God. Be transformed. Paul is interested in the inner life. When I used the crass statement in the beginning, "Jesus doesn't want your heart, don't give Jesus your heart, He wants more than that," I didn't mean to denigrate the importance of the inner life, because Paul goes right to that in verse 2.

You know, Paul is always talking about the inner man. He's always talking about the mind or the heart. He knows that true religion flows from a renewed inner life. When he speaks of the mind, he's talking about our believing faculty, our thinking faculty, our willing faculty, and our desiring faculty, especially those things. Feelings are probably thrown in there somewhere, but they are not as important as those things, the faculty in which we believe and think and will and desire. He

says, that has to be transformed in order to live the Christian life. Well how is it transformed? Through its renewal. Well how is it renewed? Through being brought captive to the word of God.

You know one of those beautiful things and one of those brave things that Martin Luther said when he stood before that Diet of Worms was "My conscience is captive to the word of God" and that's what the apostle wants for every Christian. He wants Christians whose consciences, their minds, their inner man is captive to the word of God because the Christian life flows from a renewed inner man.

We live in a world where it is increasingly common for Christians to think that their opinions about a particular matter are just as valid as God's, or that their opinions about a particular matter including theology are just as valid as say, the Bible's. A dear friend of mine, Mark Dever, pastor at Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, was teaching a theological seminar at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary before Al Mohler came as the president. Before there was an evangelical president, before there was a evangelical faculty there, he was one of the few evangelicals there. In fact, a professor said to him one day, "Mark you show some signs of intelligence, how can you be an evangelical?" It wasn't a friendly environment. Mark was teaching a theological seminar one day and he made an assertion from Scripture about God. A student in the class interrupted him and said, " Excuse me Mark, but I like to think of God as wise, but not meddling; compassionate but not overpowering; resourceful but not interrupting. That's how I like to think about God." Mark responded, "Thank you Bill for telling us so much about yourself, but we're here to learn about God from the Bible."

Now it is funny, but frankly you run into Christians like that all the time. They don't like what the Bible says about God, so they come up with an improved version. That will not renew a mind, it will not produce the transformation which grounds the Christians life. The Bible must be the force which works in the transforming and the renewal of our deepest inner self. That inner mind must be subdued in recreated but the word of God.

One last thing, Here in verse 2, Paul says, why is all this? "So that you might prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." Paul knows that minds which have been transformed by the renewing work of God's Holy Spirit in accordance with the word of God will be able to discern what they ought to do. You can't do the will of God if you don't know the will of God, and you can't make a discerning choice if you don't know the truth of God. And so the renewed mind ,according to God's word, is a mind that is able to be discerning in a world that needs discernment.

Sin never makes things easier friends, it always complicates things. We live in a fallen world. That means to live as Christians in a fallen world can be a complicated thing and you need discernment and the Apostle Paul says that transformed mind that is captive to the word of God becomes a discerning mind.

You know, as you look at these two verses you've got to think that Psalm 119 is in the background of Paul's thoughts and verse 78 in the psalm comes to mind at this time. When the psalmist says, "Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies," what's the psalmist saying? He's saying that Your word gives me discernment, it makes me wise. I don't just know *stuff*, I know how to put it to work. Paul is saying, you want to live the Christian life? You need a mind transformed by the word of God in order that you can be a discerning Christian, knowing and therefore doing the will of God. There is much more to be said, but we don't have more time to say it. May God bless you as you seek to give yourselves as living sacrifices. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, hear our prayer. Bless Your word and grant that we would be discerning, whole life worshippers and sacrifices *for Jesus sake. Amen.*

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