

BECAUSE OF GOD'S MERCY...
ROMANS 12:1



A few weeks ago, Americans received an unexpected COVID-gift from the United States government. And the topic quickly became, “what are you going to do with your money?” Some paid bills. Some paid down debt. Some made purchases for which they had been saving. Some gave it to others who needed it more than they did. Some put it in their savings accounts.

The question was appropriate when we received those checks. And the question is reasonable this morning as we think about the unexpected gift of salvation that we have received from God. The gift is unexpected because we are sinners only deserving God’s wrath. And the gift is unexpected because, most of us are Gentiles, who were outside the promise made to God’s chosen people, Israel. And then here came the gospel! Of all unexpected gifts, this is the greatest and most significant gift we’ve ever received.

The question we’ve been asking about government funds is appropriate to this gift of salvation as well: “what are you going to do with your salvation?” Paul seems to be anticipating that question by the way he transitions into Romans 12. He has explained his understanding of the basics of theology — man’s sin (and God’s wrath), salvation, sanctification, and God’s sovereignty. Now as he transitions into talking about the believer’s service of God in chapters 12-16, he is going to make one compelling summary statement and call to the church —

BE OBEDIENT IN EVERY AREA OF YOUR LIFE AS A RESPONSE TO GOD’S MERCIFUL WORK IN YOUR LIFE.

As MacArthur has noted, “The key to a productive and satisfying Christian life is not in getting more [we already have all we need!] but in giving all....Our supreme calling is to serve God with all our being...”

In this opening verse, the apostle Paul makes an appeal to the Romans that will guide his discussion in the rest of the letter. Let’s look at this appeal from two perspectives:

1. The **REASON** for the Appeal: God’s **MERCY**
2. The **CONTENT** of the Appeal: Present **YOURSELF**
 - What is Presented: Our **LIVES**
 - How it is Presented: As a **SACRIFICE**
 - Why it is Presented: It is **WORSHIP**

1. The **REASON** for the Appeal: God's **MERCY**

- The first word of Paul's transition in this verse is **urge**. It is also translated "exhort," or "encourage" — commonly a call to battle. Here it is probably being used by Paul with his pastoral or apostolic authority.
 - ✓ It is a strong word, and not technically a command, but it has the feel of a command, doesn't it? This is Paul's way to say, "there is an implication of everything I've said and I urge you in the strongest way to consider it and follow through with it."
 - ✓ He wants the believer to live out and experience the fullness of what God has for us in our salvation (something the Romans were already known to be doing: **1:8; 16:26**).
 - ✓ One commentator said about the necessity of living out the implications of our salvation, "A doctrine, a gospel, which has no significance for man's life and conduct is not a real gospel; and life and conduct which are not based on that which comes to us in the gospel are not Christian life and Christian conduct." [Nygren, quoted by Hiebert] In other words, the gospel *is* transformative. And when someone isn't transformed by the gospel, there is good reason to question if they have believed the biblical gospel. So let's listen to this pastoral urging by Paul.
 - ✓ Also notice that Paul uses the word **brothers** to appeal to the Romans and us.
 - It is a gentle appeal to their common bond as sons of the Father (not his position as apostle). He is in the same position as the Roman readers — they all need the same thing — living for Christ.
 - But it is also a subtle reminder that only those who are in Christ can truly worship God, and if one is not a brother of Paul, then he must first become a brother before attempting to do this. As has been said, only those who are spiritually *alive* can be *living* sacrifices.
- Now what is the basis of Paul's appeal in this verse? **The mercies of God**. In fact, Paul uses two devices to point to the mercy of God:
 - ✓ **Therefore** — on the basis of 11:33-36 (esp. v. 36), present your life...; and on the basis of chs. 1-11 (sin, redemption, new life, new fellowship...), present your life to Him. (last week's sermon)
 - ✓ **Mercies of God** — because of incredible **mercies** (pl.) shown to you by God, present yourself...
 - Note that Paul does not appeal to the *wrath* of God for their worship. This is not a fear motivated obedience. This is a tender call, an appeal from love — remember all God has done to soften your heart and draw you to Himself.
 - What were these **mercies** of God?
 - ... This word is different than the typical word for "mercy." This one seems to emphasize God's "grief" or "lamentation" towards sinners — His sympathy for them in their need.
 - ... He is sympathetic and willing to help us sinners in our sinful need (e.g., **2 Cor. 1:3ff**).

... We have seen this kind of mercy when He has patiently withheld His wrath, waiting for sinners to repent (2:1-4), and when He has saved undeserving sinners (9:15-18; 11:30-32).

... But this isn't just a general mercy is it? It is a mercy that is provided generally — being offered to all men — *but* it is also a mercy that has worked in my life particularly. How have you experienced the mercy of God in your life? How has He been compassionate to you? (That's a good question to ask on communion Sunday.)

... Interestingly, this word is almost always used in the NT in the plural form. A similar word was used in the OT in the plural but almost always translated as a singular — all God's manifestations of mercy are a singular, collective expression of His mercy. It indicates the depth of God's compassion towards those in need. So here it could probably be singular or plural; I like the plural translation because it emphasizes that God's mercy has many manifestations; He showers us with mercy many times and in many ways.

- Why should the believer follow Paul's urging and present himself to God? Because he is motivated by the mercy that he has received from God. We are not "giving" to "get" from God — that's works salvation. But we are giving because we *have* received. This is not an attempt to pay God back. It is a joyful response of obedience to the One who has done and given so much for us. How could we do otherwise?
- There is also another implied reason for giving ourselves to God in submission to Him: when Paul says that his urging is *by* the mercies of God, it also implies that obeying this command is another mercy to the believer. As he has already explained, obedience to God keeps us from bondage to sin (6:11, 14). So we are compelled to submit to God because of past mercy received, and when we obey, that obedience becomes the vehicle of even more mercy from God (6:22)! Mercy embraced and obeyed yields more mercy.

2. The CONTENT of the Appeal: Present YOURSELF

- The word **present** was used in the Gk. OT as a technical term for placing an offering on the altar; it has the idea of "surrender" or "yield" which is an appropriate picture for believers who are now part of a "holy priesthood" (1 Pt. 2:5). There are two significant parallel texts in Romans:
 - ✓ Romans 1:24ff demonstrates the folly of those who reject this authority of God (1:25).
 - ✓ Romans 6:13, 19 demonstrate that this is the new life of the believer who is alive from the dead.
 - ✓ Paul is urging and compelling believers to perpetually live and give themselves in sacrifice to God.
 - ✓ That leads us to ask, so what specifically is presented?

• **What is Presented: Our LIVES**

- ✓ Paul says we are to present our *bodies*.
 - That obviously could be a reference to our physical bodies, and some have said that's what Paul means, because he refers in **v. 2** to the mind, so he is urging the transformation of both the outer and inner man. To present our bodies is to fight against the flesh of sin as it is manifested in our bodies (e.g., 6:6; 7:5).
 - However, Paul is more likely thinking of the totality of one's life: it is the entire person in his/her interaction with the world. Everything about us is surrendered to God. That makes more sense, because in the following verses, he does not talk about the use of our bodies for God, but the use of our lives for Him (e.g., vv. 3-8, 9-13, 14-21). And elsewhere he has already talked about presenting *ourselves* to God (e.g., 6:13). This also fits the contrast that Paul is creating here: instead of dead animals offered on an altar, the believer offers his ongoing life as a sacrifice.
- ✓ When we are saved, we are saved to live with God eternally — to enjoy Him forever (8:23-25). And that eternal life has already begun for the believer. God wants us to know the delights of living for Him now — already. He wants us to know the freedom *now* of being released from sin's bondage. We are in Christ and not Adam, but we can still go back to our old homestead and “work” and “live” for our old master (you probably have some typical ways that is expressed in your life). That's folly.
- ✓ Paul would urge us to know and experience the freedom and fellowship of living enslaved to God. Steve Lawson has said it this way (is this you? Is this your commitment?) —

I am a part of the fellowship of the unashamed.
The die has been cast. I've stepped over the line; the decision has been made;
I am a disciple of Jesus Christ.
I will not look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still.
My past is redeemed; my present makes sense; my future is secure.
I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits or popularity.
I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded.
I now live by faith, love by patience, live by prayer, and labor by power.
My pace is set; my gait is fast; my goal is the heaven. My road is narrow; my way is rough; my companions few; my Guide reliable; my mission clear!
I cannot be bought, compromised, deterred, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed.
I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity; I will not negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, nor meander in the maze of mediocrity.
I will not give up, back up, let up, or shut up until I have prayed up, preached up, stored up, and stayed up the cause of Jesus Christ! I am a disciple of Jesus Christ.
I must go until He returns; give until I drop; preach until all know; and work until He comes.
And when He comes to get His own, He will have no trouble recognizing me; My colors are flying high, and they are clear for all to see.

• **How it is Presented: As a SACRIFICE**

- ✓ Notice that Paul says the believer gives himself to God as a *sacrifice*.
 - The OT has a sacrificial system that early NT believers would have known well. But in the NT, that system was done away with by Christ who fulfilled the Law (Mt. 5:17-18).
 - Now, believers do not offer bloody sacrifices on a literal altar; they offer “spiritual sacrifices” to God” (e.g., Heb. 13:15-16). The ultimate spiritual sacrifice is our own lives, as Paul notes here.
 - These sacrifices are not to appease God and remove our debt of sin; they are joyful offerings of gratitude for what God has done for us (accomplishing what we could not). But it *is*, like the OT sacrifice, an acknowledgement that we are wholly devoted to God (e.g., Phil. 2:30; Col. 1:24).
 - To offer oneself to God as a sacrifice means that we no longer claim our own “rights.” We are willing to be used by God however He wills, suffering and enduring with joy whatever He gives, honoring Him in every part of our lives (11:36). “While believers may be prone to speak about ‘making sacrifices for the Lord’ — an expression not found in the Bible — Paul’s appeal goes vastly beyond such a view of Christian responsibility.” [Hiebert] It’s a total sacrifice.
 - Paul notes three characteristics of this sacrifice —

- ✓ It is a *living sacrifice*.
 - This is in contrast to the OT sacrifices that came to the altar dead (1st century readers had smelled these sacrifices!). Our lives are a perpetual sacrifice — they do not make payment for our sin, but they are acts of grateful self-surrender.
 - One writer has well noted, “The death of the one ‘Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world,’ has swept all dead victims off the altar of God, to make room for the redeemed themselves as ‘living sacrifices’ to Him who ‘made Him to be sin for us.’” [Brown, quoted in Hiebert]
 - So we crucify our old desires and live in the reality of a greater life and freedom —

- Gal. 2:20 *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”*
- Gal. 5:22-24 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*
- Gal. 6:14 *But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (cf. also Phil. 1:19-21)*

- Even more, our life is to be lived out of reality that God has given us new life (5:17; 6:4, 8ff).
- We have been given new life (a new way to live) so that we might live for God (alone) and not our sin. I regularly ask, “Did Christ have to die because of this? Then it’s not life for me....” ...

- ✓ It is a **holy sacrifice**. I.e., it is a sacrifice that is set apart for God, to be used by God for His purposes.
 - We no longer have the liberty to use our minds and bodies in sinful and unholy ways. [Hiebert]
 - We have seen that truth throughout the letter; but the additional hope is that OT sacrifices had no inherent holiness, while we can offer a voluntary sacrifice to God that is for His purposes.
 - We can do things that are holy and we can do things that reflect the holiness of God (1:7).
- ✓ It is an **acceptable sacrifice**. God is pleased with the sacrifice we make of ourselves. We can live for His pleasure and He can be joyful for our lives (not that we are inherently righteous, but that we are obedient to Him).
 - Our acceptance is not ultimately because of us, but because of Christ living in and through us.
 - This is repeated elsewhere — 2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:10; Phil. 4:18; Col. 3:20; Heb. 13:16.
 - Man is made for God's glory (11:36), so it naturally follows that we live for His pleasure. Our greatest pleasure is to live for His pleasure. And we can. Is that your goal and pleasure?

• **Why it is Presented: It is WORSHIP**

- ✓ This is **your spiritual service of worship**.
 - How will you serve God? You can clean buildings and lead home groups and disciple and evangelize, and give financial gifts, and administrate.
 - But Paul says that living our lives as a perpetual sacrifice is the core of our spiritual service.
 - The word **spiritual** is a word that typically means something like “logical” or “rational.” This is reasonable to do, in light of the mercy we have received. It is the only reasonable thing to do!
 - Any other kind of response to God's mercy (like ignoring spiritual gifts or entertaining sin) is irrational, illogical, foolish, and a waste of all that God has given us.
- ✓ This is why we say that life is not about me; it's about God. As long as you and I live to make ourselves the end of all our desires, we will never be satisfied. God and His glory truly is the end for which God created the world. Life will always be unsatisfying if we live for anything else.
 - So we might ask, “is life unsatisfying to you?” I'm not asking if life is hard. It is. I've seen and heard a dozen or more examples of deep hardship this week. But there is satisfaction even when life is hard. And if it's not satisfying, we might ask, am I worshipping God by giving Him my life, or am I worshipping myself by indulging the pleasures that I want?
 - Our **worship** dare not terminate on ourselves. And our worship is far more than what we do on Sunday morning — our worship is about the focus and purpose of our lives.

CONCLUSION:

Will this kind of life cost you anything? No. It will not cost you *anything*. It will cost you *everything*.

- ✓ We will lose our fleshly indulgences. It will cost us sin.
- ✓ We will lose sweat. It will cost us the labor of fighting against sin.
- ✓ We will lose our personal liberties. It will cost us our “rights” so that we won’t lead others to sin.
- ✓ We will lose our finances. It will cost us financially as we give up work to serve Christ and right checks to support ministries and people.
- ✓ We will lose time. It will cost us time as we invest in people, prioritizing their needs over our own.
- ✓ We will lose sleep. It will cost us rest as we wrestle in prayer and carry the burdens of others.
- ✓ We will lose (at times) our physical lives. It will cost us health, and persecution, and martyrdom.

Are all those costs worthwhile? Yes. An infinite amount of times, yes. You and I will never regret in Heaven anything we gave up here as an expression of our devotion to Christ. Listen to how John Piper says it: “...biblical self-denial means ‘Deny yourselves lesser joys so you don’t lose the big ones.’ Which is the same as saying: Really pursue joy! Don’t settle for anything less than full and lasting joy.”

And real and lasting joy is found here — “Therefore, I urge you 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.”

BENEDICTION: [Romans 11:33-36](#)