

# A LIVING SACRIFICE

Romans 12:1-21

Key Verse: 12:1

**“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship.”**

In chapters 1-8 we learned the essence of the gospel: Whoever believes in Jesus is clothed with the righteousness of God, is saved from the power of sin and death, and receives the glorious inheritance of the kingdom of God. In chapters 9-11 we learned that God exercises his sovereign choice by his mercy to save his people. Because of God’s great mercy, everyone has hope, including the Jews who had hardened their hearts. Now, in chapters 12-16, Paul teaches us how to apply gospel faith in practice - personally, in the Christian community, and in society. The gospel not only saves us in the future, but it also transforms us in the present as we live out our faith. It is vital that we practice our faith. Paul’s epistles usually follow a pattern: he lays a good foundation of sound doctrine, and then exhorts us to apply sound doctrine to our lives practically. Accordingly, we can see that sound teaching and practical application should always go together. If we emphasize one more than the other we will be unhealthy. Knowledge without practice can make one a hypocrite. On the other hand, zealous activity without knowledge can make one a dangerous busybody. We need to balance knowledge and practice. What we know, we should practice, and what we practice should constantly be examined in light of Bible teachings. Then we can grow continually and be healthy and fruitful.

Chapter 12, verses 1-2 provide the essence of the practical application of the gospel. These verses tell us the basic attitude that any individual Christian or church should have toward God. These verses are the general statement that undergird the more specific teachings in 12:3-15:13. We will spend considerable time on these foundational verses. 12:3-8 teach us how we can serve in the Christian community. Verses 9-21 tell us how we can engage in the broader society.

## A LIVING SACRIFICE

**First, offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God (1-2).** Let's read verse 1. **“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship.”** The main point of this verse is **“to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice...to God.”** This is precisely how we should respond to God. Yet, before going into depth about the meaning of this, let's consider some of the qualifying phrases. Paul begins with the words, **“Therefore... in view of God’s mercy.”** God’s mercy has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. God saves anyone who believes in Christ from the power of sin and death and makes us his beloved children forever. God gives this amazing grace to totally undeserving people through faith in Jesus. This is nothing but God’s mercy. We should always keep God’s mercy “in view.” For example, while driving, we frequently look into the rear-view mirror to see what is happening behind us. In the same way, the eyes of our hearts constantly glance at something. What is it? It should be God’s mercy. God’s mercy should be a recurring thought of our hearts. God’s mercy should always be kept “in view.” This is the key to properly responding to God. What do you have “in view”? Let's keep God’s mercy “in view.” In verse 1, Paul “urges,” he does not “command.” God does not force people to worship him. God wins our hearts through his mercy so that we respond to him willingly.

Now let's consider the main point: **“to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice...to God.”** The word **“bodies”** refers to our physical bodies. This means that what we actually do with our bodies and the actions of our daily lives should be offered to God. This asserts that we offer ourselves entirely to God. Earlier, Paul emphasized that we should offer every part of ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness (6:13). This means our whole being: thoughts, desires, will, talents, time and energy, hands, feet, mouth, and actions. All that we are should be offered to God for his glory. It is because Jesus purchased us with his blood (1Co 6:19b-20).

The word **“offer”** means to make available for use. It is like saying, “Here I am. Use me as you please.” This is the yielding of our will to God; it is a positive act of faith. It requires a decision in using the freedom God has given

## A LIVING SACRIFICE

us through Jesus Christ. Every day we have a choice to make. We can offer ourselves to God, or we can hold back. If we hold back, we will default to selfishness. When we offer ourselves to God, he fills us, equips us, and uses us in meaningful service. If we withhold ourselves from God, we inevitably stumble into sin again. This is why we should offer ourselves to God positively and eagerly. A “**living**” sacrifice is in contrast to the dead animal sacrifices, which were each offered only once. Living sacrifices are offered again and again, day after day. Our offering should be “**holy,**” that is, fully committed to God, not partially. The goal of this offering is to please God, not ourselves or other people. As we please God, he blesses us. When we prepared the recent ISBC, one man decided to offer himself to God by transporting international delegates. It did not seem to be a glamorous job but was vital practical service. This man made himself available at any time and was willing to do whatever was necessary. Especially, he went back and forth from the airport so many times. In the process, he came into personal contact with servants of God from many different places. He could hear how God is working in each of their ministries and countries. After the conference, he was full of strength and joy and said, “I could see God’s vision for world salvation!” Offering ourselves to God without reservation is the way of deep joy and blessing.

Offering ourselves to God as a living sacrifice is true and proper worship. Worship is more than singing praise to God on Sunday. True worship is to live each day and each moment for the glory and pleasure of God in all that we do. For students, to study hard for God’s glory is an act of worship. For workers, to do excellent work for the glory of God is an act of worship. For parents, the daily labor of bringing up children in the knowledge of God is an act of worship. Worshiping God is a way of life.

In order to worship God properly, we need to discover something. That is what pleases God. What does God want? In other words, what is God’s will? In verse 2, Paul tells us how to discover the will of God. There are both things we should not do and things we should do. On the negative side, he says, “**Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world....**” To “**conform**” is to let the world form our value system and worldview, which guide our behavior.

# A LIVING SACRIFICE

The pattern of this world is against God. Jesus characterized people of his times as unbelieving, perverse, adulterous and sinful (Mk 8:38; Lk 9:41). Sometimes we think the world is like a fun zone, and fun is good. It is true that the world God created is good (1Ti 4:4). However, the world without God is Satan's domain, and his purpose is to deceive and destroy mankind (Jn 8:44). We should not be deceived, thinking that there is something good in the world without God. Apostle John says that this world consists of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1Jn 2:16). In the past we conformed to the pattern of this world, though we may have been unaware of it. We were influenced by peer pressure or fear. But now, as God's children, we should not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. We should fight against the trends of this world. We should not be influenced by the world but influence the world as the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5:13a,14a).

On the positive side, Paul says, **"...but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"** (2b). To **"transform"** is to change the nature of something. In the past, we naturally gratified our flesh desires and glorified ourselves. But as we are being transformed, we want to please God and bless others. In a word, we should become like Jesus. How? By the renewing of our minds. How, though, can we renew our minds? Shall we take mind-control classes, experiment with new drugs like the character in the movie "Limitless," or have some kind of cyber-surgery? Well, that's not what Paul urges. The renewal of our minds is possible when the Holy Spirit works in us (Titus 3:5b). We cannot control the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit is pleased to work in us when we repent. Acts 3:19 says, **"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."** The renewing of our mind is an ongoing process; it happens day by day. This means we should be growing spiritually. The life of faith is not just a repetition of the same thing. It is a process of constant growth in the mind of Christ. Each day is new, dynamic and exciting. As Jeremiah says, God's love, compassion and faithfulness are new every day (Lam 3:22-23).

As we renew our minds, we are able to discern the will of God. We can know specifically what God wants to do in our lives, community and the

## A LIVING SACRIFICE

world. Then we discover that God's will is not restrictive and burdensome. It is good, pleasing and perfect. It is the way to abundant life and to bear good fruit. One lady grew up like a princess in China, the only child of prominent parents. They sent her to America to study in the hope that she would return and take over the family business. As a college student, she offered herself to God and he used her to help establish a vibrant student ministry. She tasted a joy she had never known before. When the time came for her to return to China, she sought God's will and discovered that it was to remain here. She did so, disappointing her parents. Soon God led her to a handsome, talented, faithful man of God. She established a blessed and happy Christian family and now has two sons: Titus and Timothy. This made her parents very happy too. God's will is good, pleasing and perfect. Thus far, Paul has laid foundational principles: offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice and be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Next, he teaches how to live in Christian community and society.

**Second, humbly build up the Christian community (3-8).** Of course, offering ourselves to God is a very personal matter. At the same time, there is a community aspect of this. As we offer ourselves to God, we should be useful in his church. To be useful in the church, the primary quality is to be humble. Paul said: **“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you”** (3). How we think of ourselves is very important. Those who think highly of themselves can be a source of pain and anguish to their fellow believers. We need to think of ourselves with sober judgment. In this respect, the quality of one's faith is very important. With faith we can have God's viewpoint. God is our Creator; we are his creatures. God is almighty and infinite; we are made of the dust and doomed to die. God is our Redeemer; we are forgiven sinners saved only by his grace. God is the Sovereign Ruler of his church; we are members. When we recognize this, we can be humble. We can learn how God wants to use us and just as importantly, what our limits are. We can respect the gifting he has given us and willingly offer ourselves to be used accordingly. Then we can be useful in building up the church of God.

# A LIVING SACRIFICE

Paul helps us understand the church with the metaphor of the human body. Verses 4-5 say, **“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”** Each one of us has a specific and necessary function in the body. Each one of us should contribute to the good of the whole body. The body needs each of us and each of us needs the body. In fact, each member belongs to all the others. This is a totally organic relational network. God governs this network with his wisdom. He distributes different gifts to members of the body. Paul mentions specific gifts: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy (6-8). This is not an exhaustive list; many other gifts are mentioned in the Bible. The first gift mentioned here is prophesying. To prophesy is to communicate God’s message to comfort, encourage, and strengthen God’s people. The other six gifts mentioned are self-explanatory. Paul’s emphasis is on how these gifts are exercised. Giving should be generously. Leading should be diligently. Showing mercy should be cheerfully. Whatever one’s gift, he or she should exercise it faithfully as a stewardship from God. What gift have you received from God? Are you humbly using it to build up the body?

**Third, love marks the Christian life (9-21).** As humility marks the Christian community, so love marks the Christian life. In the soil of humility, genuine love grows well. What is love? People may define this word in many ways. The word “love” appears two times in this section. In verse 9, it is translated from **“agape,”** God’s love. In verse 10, it is translated from **“philadelphia,”** brotherly love. As we receive God’s unfailing love at the cross of Jesus, we should share this love with others (5:8; 8:37). Verse 9 reads, **“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”** Love must be genuine, from the heart. It is a genuine concern for the welfare of others. Love is discerning: it hates evil and clings firmly to what is good. Condoning wrongs is not genuine love. Genuine love helps others hold onto goodness through repentance of their sins, even though it may be painful. Genuine love hates sin yet loves sinners. Genuine love heals inner wounds so that people may live healthy lives. It also trains people as useful servants of God.

## A LIVING SACRIFICE

Verse 10 says, **“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.”** All believers are God’s family members. We should be loyal to one another, faithful to each other and deeply committed. Honoring others is one way to love them. It is not easy to honor others first. When we do so, we feel like we are becoming nobody. However, as we honor others first, we are filled with joy. Also, we should never be lacking in zeal, but keep our spiritual fervor, serving the Lord (11). Lazy people cannot love others. Love is an action verb. To love requires spiritual energy or zeal. So, we must keep our spiritual fervor. We should be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (12). This is possible when the hope of Jesus’ coming again is burning in our hearts. We are to share with the Lord’s people who are in need and practice hospitality (13).

Among the practical teachings in verses 14-21 is a repeated theme of how Christians respond to evil. Whether it is persecution, or simply the evil that is common in this world, we will all confront evil. By its very nature, evil is unjust. It is the cause of great pain in our world. Our natural response is to curse evildoers and repay them in kind. However, those who respond to evil with evil will become evil themselves. We are to respond to evil with blessing, compassion and humility. We are not to seek vengeance, but to leave room for God’s wrath. We are to overcome evil with good. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Recently, at a conference for mission leaders in the US, I met a man named David Pierce, leader of a ministry called Steiger. God called him to serve the young people of Europe. With all the drugs, immorality and perverse behavior that dominated their youth culture, it looked like an impossible task. At first, all he could do was cry out in prayer to God in the forests surrounding Amsterdam. Then he was inspired to form a rock band. It was not a traditional Christian band that performs for a Christian audience, but one that reaches young people who would never step into a church. Among the secular bands that have played before or after his is one that promotes teenage suicide. He is right in the middle of the evil of the world. His show begins with loud guitars

## **A LIVING SACRIFICE**

and drums playing, while David uses a chainsaw to cut down a wooden barricade and enter the stage. The audience roars: “Yeah! A chainsaw!” Later, David jumps up and down on a bed and says, “I like sex.” Again, the audience roars with approval. Then he says, “After marriage.” And people say, “What?” The highlight of his shows are dramatic scenes of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection through modern performance art. Then comes a message and an altar call. David said he always experiences two responses: on one hand, there are those who spit, ridicule, mock and throw things. On the other hand, there are some who come to repentance and faith in Jesus. The striking thing is David’s conviction that the gospel is the power of God that overcomes all the evil of the world.

Today we have learned to practice gospel faith. It begins with offering ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, in view of his mercy. It includes serving the church by humbly exercising our gifts. It also calls for overcoming the evil of the world with God’s love and goodness. Let’s offer ourselves to God.