



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

## **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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### **A Call to a Life of Service/Worship**

Romans 12:1-2

There is no question in Scripture that a saving relationship with God brings with it incredible benefits- like

- Joy in the midst of sorrow- as seen in the return of God's people to Jerusalem where they were met with opposition and failed expectation, nevertheless Nehemiah exhorted God's people ...

Nehemiah 8:10b, "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

- Rejoicing in spite of an uncertain future. Consider Peter's exhortation on the Second Coming of Christ:

1 Peter 1:6, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials."

- Peace in spite of the stresses of this world. Paul says that in the midst of the stresses of this life, as we trust God in prayer that:

Philippians 4:7, "...the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

These and many more benefits are ours in Christ! And yet today, the church doesn't seem to be filled with much joy, peace, hope, rejoicing, or gladness! But we have our reasons.

- First there is the pandemic which has brought many of us to the breaking point.
- Then there is the power grab on the part of our government.
- There also is the ominous political climate of our country.
- Add to all of this our daily struggles when it comes to our walk, holiness, service in Christ's Kingdom, and you have all the makings for dour, disappointed, and grumpy Christians!

Yet men like Peter, Nehemiah, and Paul would rebuke our generation. For them, Christianity translated to love, joy, peace, and kindness in the crucible!

How is this possible? Paul in the book of Romans calls us to the "higher life" of willing sacrifice and service in the midst of a hostile world. Romans 12:1-2 integrates the doctrine of this epistle into the duty and grounds the duty of this epistle into the doctrine. Notice verse 1.

Romans 12:1, "...spiritual service of worship."

Paul uses the language from Leviticus and the Sacrificial System in which God's people daily were to live their lives in light of the worship of God!<sup>1</sup> So how do we do this? How do we offer ourselves to God as a sacrifice of praise, rejoicing, and gladness when the world is filled with obstacles? That is the focus of Romans 12:1-2.

Notice the fundamental call to the life of service/worship.

Romans 12:1b, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice..."

The phrase *present your bodies* is the technical term for placing an offering on the altar by a priest. Furthermore, it is in the aorist tense — a past tense of completed action. The idea behind this, therefore, is that a living sacrifice is one who ONCE FOR ALL has given themselves to God. In other words, Paul is talking about a mindset/a worldview/a way of living! As a “living sacrifice” we must view ourselves as the property of God- at all times, in all places, even in the most mundane situations.

This is brought out when Paul says, “present your bodies.” At this time in the Greco-Roman world, the prevalent view when it came to “the physical body” was that it didn’t matter. It was the prison-house of the soul and inherently evil. Now, because the body was deemed as such, what was done to/with it was of little consequence to the gods. For obvious reasons, this view opened the door to all sorts of immorality. Recall, the chant of the Corinthian believers as they dove into sin, “All things are lawful!...” (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:23) Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

Tragically, many believers in the early church, who have many counterparts in the church today, found it easy to fall back into the immoral practices of their former lives, justifying their sin by the false and heretical idea that what the body did could not harm the soul and had no spiritual or eternal significance. Much as in our own day, because immorality was so pervasive, many Christians who did not themselves lead immoral lives became tolerant of sin in fellow believers, thinking it merely was the flesh doing what it naturally did, completely apart from the soul’s influence or responsibility. (MacArthur, 1994, p. 143)

Accordingly, that Paul here calls upon us to “present our bodies” to God tells us that even in the context of the unimportant or the irrelevant, what we do matters! For God has staked a claim on entire person!<sup>2</sup> It is as Abraham Kuyper said,

There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign overall, does not cry, ‘Mine!’ (James D. Bratt, 1998, p. 488)

Such is the case when it comes to God’s people which is why Paul calls us here to “Present ourselves to God!” Now if you take this seriously, it will transform your view of what you are at any moment! This is why Paul used the metaphor of “a living... sacrifice.” In Bible times, it was understood that a union existed between the worshipper and his offering. We talk about this frequently during worship when we say, “Along with your offering, place your heart in the plates as they are passed.” With this union in mind, consider the difference between a “dead sacrifice” and a “living sacrifice.”

- A dead sacrifice would be the animal that was offered.
- A living sacrifice was the worshipper who via their offering devoted themselves to God to be consumed for His purpose.

The best an example that I have found of this is found in Genesis 22. After thirty long years of waiting, Abraham was blessed by God with the son of Promise who would:

1. Carry on Abraham's name,
2. Be used by God to multiply Abraham as the stars in the sky, and
3. Continue the Covenant Community established by God.

Yet to test the sincerity of Abraham's faith, the Lord called the patriarch to give the ultimate sacrifice — the giving up of this "son of promise"!

Genesis 22:9-12, "Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'"

Had Abraham continued — had he Lord not stopped him — Isaac would have been a DEAD sacrifice, AND Abraham would have been a LIVING Sacrifice, testifying to the world *"I will serve the Lord even if it means giving to God that which is most precious in my eyes!"*

Such is a LIVING Sacrifice! They understand that everything in their life belongs to the Lord to be used and utilized as He wills! They understand that they exist for God's purpose and pleasure, not their own — which is the emphasis of the next phrase: "a living and holy sacrifice."

The word used here for "holy", ἅγιος (*hagios*), is the same word translated as "saint" in the Bible. It means "set apart ones" or "claimed ones"! That is what holiness is all about! It speaks of a life given to the Lord with no strings attached! Yet the emphasis is NOT on our giving, BUT on the claim of God at salvation! Because He has claimed us, moral purity in thought and life follows!

- That is the fundamental call that rests on all Christians in their life! God claims the sinner which makes him a saint such that now they are in the full-time service of the Lord!
- Now for sure, this is a difficult calling. How possibly can we do it? That brings us to the basis or foundation of the call.

Romans 12:1a, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God..."

With this, Paul turns to the basis upon which the Christian gives himself to the Lord. And that basis or foundations is "God's mercies"! This is what makes Christianity so radical! It is NOT that as sinners we are a cut above the non-Christian — intrinsically superior (for that certain is NOT the case)! It is that we have an element to our living which the non-Christian does not! And that element is God's grace, referenced here as "His mercies"!

The word for “mercies”<sup>3</sup>— notice it is plural — ultimately goes back to the Hebrew, רַחֲמִים (*rachamim*)<sup>4</sup>, which also is a plural. Grammarians call this an intensive plural and so frequently translate it as “great mercy” or “manifold mercy”! And that clearly is the focus. He is NOT talking about the particulars of God’s mercy that make it great (that essentially is what Romans 1-11 is all about)! RATHER, he has stepped back from the epistle as a whole — as we might do with a massive Mountain Range — seeking to take it all in! You can just imagine how heavy and full Paul’s heart must have been as he thought about the glory and majesty of God’s mercy and grace as revealed in this epistle! Consider it! In this epistle God’s “mercy”/grace is described as a:

- Kind mercy, 2:4.
- Patient mercy, 9:22; 11:22.
- Loving mercy, 5:5; 8:35, 39.

It is a mercy that grants the child of God...

- Eternal Life, 5:21; 6:22-23.
- Hope, 5:2, 20, 24.
- Grace, 1:7; 3:24; 4:16.
- Salvation, 1:16.
- Reconciliation, 5:10.
- A Divine calling, 8:30.
- No condemnation, 8:1-4a.
- Conformity to Christ, 8:29.
- The promise of a glorified body, 8:30.
- Freedom from the power of sin, 6:18; 7:6.
- The promise of a resurrected body, 8:11.
- The privilege and status of sonship, 8:14-17.
- The promise of a participation in His honor, 2:10; cf. 9:21.
- Faith — which is mentioned thirty times in the first eleven chapters of Romans.

It is all of this and much more that serves as the basis or foundation for the calling that God has placed on our lives. When we come to see all that God has given us in Christ, the natural response is to serve Him! Speaking of the “mercy” of granted to us in the promise of our future blessing, John wrote this:

1 John 3:2-3, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

After describing nine characteristics of spiritual maturation, Peter explains how they become incarnate in the child of God:

2 Peter 1:9, “For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind *or* short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins.”

And that is why Paul in our passage roots the call of Self-denying Service to the mercies of God.

Romans 12:1, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice...”

The more we come to understand these mercies, the more we will grow in our walks with God!

Now to serve in God’s Kingdom as God’s children with any other foundation than His mercy is a train wreck! With that in mind, Paul gives a very important catalyst when it comes to the call here; he assures us of what we are in Christ.

### The Catalyst: Assurance of What we are in Christ

Romans 12:1c, “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.”

The language here is a metaphor once again derived from the Old Testament sacrificial system which makes a distinction between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” offerings.<sup>5</sup> Now on account of our default programming which endeavors to relate to God on the basis of our morality or religious activity<sup>6</sup>, it’s easy to twist Paul’s metaphor here and take this verse as a calling to endeavor to live in a way that makes us acceptable to God. And sadly, this passion has become Christianity for many! A Christian is someone who does this or doesn’t do that! As such many respond to this verse by focusing on the horizontal and looking within — at our attitude, acts, service, devotion, or lack thereof! Maybe for a time in our naivety we consider ourselves to be successful here.

But just wait. In time we will fail! And after enough setbacks, failings, and sin, we give up! And we could have predicted this. Ultimately speaking, is there anything we, by ourselves, can do which will make us acceptable to the Lord? No! Is there any offering outside of Christ that we can present to God that He will accept? No!

Because this is the case, then what is the basis of any and all “acceptable service” before the Lord? Jesus Christ NOT the imperfect, sin-fraught offering we might give in His name!

Think of it. If the “righteousness of man is filthy rags” before God (cf. Isaiah 64:6a) — man at his best — then what religious activity is there that possibly could make us acceptable to God? In fact, take away original sin and, as a perfect man, endeavor to give your all to the Lord. Will you do it? NO!

If there is anything we learn from the fall, it is this: it is NOT man as sinner that falls short of the glory of God, BUT man at his best!

Now if there were any question, consider what Paul just taught us as to the basis or foundation of the calling that Paul gives here? It is NOT rooted in our activity or works, BUT Christ's — His mercies!

You must see: Paul's exhortation was intended to place us on a brand-new footing before God — the footing of His complete and total mercy without any addition or perfecting on the part of man. As such, we do NOT take the language here about "an acceptable sacrifice" as "the goal or duty" of our Christian service.

Then how do we take the call to "present our bodies... an acceptable sacrifice to God"? It is a metaphor NOT of what we must do, BUT of what we have become in Christ! Listen to the words of, Bryan Chapel:

For many years, I thought God's acceptance hinged on my righteousness. I read passages like Romans 12:1, as a threat. This is what my heart heard: 'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice and then you will be holy and acceptable to God...' It was as though God were wagging his finger at me saying, 'Now you be a good living sacrifice, and then you will be holy and acceptable to me.' The word, 'holy,' should have been a clue to my mistake. Nothing that we will do will make us acceptable to God. Our best works are only 'filthy rags' to him (Isaiah 64:6).

### The Burnt Offering of the Believer

As you know, the Old Testament sacrificial system involved three types of sacrifices.

- Expiatory Sacrifices addressing the forgiveness of sin (the sin and guilt offerings).
- Consecratory Sacrifices representing complete and total dedication to the Lord (the burnt, cereal, and drink offerings).
- Communal Sacrifices in the local priest ate a meal with the worshipper depicting the restored fellowship that man once enjoyed with God (the peace, wave, thank, votive, freewill, and ordination offerings).

And we understand that each of these sacrifices picture and proclaim Christ! He is The Sin Offering; He is The Burnt Offering; He is The Peace Offering!

Now when it comes to our forgiveness, we certainly have no problem in seeing this! Christ is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (cf. John 1:29) He is our Sin Offering! Yet how does Christ as our Lamb correspond to the Consecratory Sacrifice? The way most people in Christ today think/live it has absolutely NO application or correspondence! For most of us, we would think that the burnt offering is our job now that we are saved! Yet that contradicts what we just professed to be true: That every sacrifice given in the context of

Judaism was/is a picture of Christ!

Christ as the Burnt Offering means that because we are in Christ, at all times and in all places, our work is seen as the work of Christ and therefore, no matter how far it falls beneath God's standard of perfection, it is acceptable! Chapell in his comments on this verse, continues:

What I missed was that the words, 'holy and acceptable,' are not statements of what we will become, but declarations of what we are. How can that be possible for sinners like us? Don't miss the opening words: 'by the mercies of God.' God's mercies in Christ make us holy and acceptable. That's why we offer ourselves as holy sacrifices in lives of worship that praise our merciful God. It's not our works that make us holy, but His. Our sacrifice doesn't make Him love us; Jesus' did. That's why we live for Him as a sacrifice of praise.

I recall as a 3- or 4-year-old child making my mom and dad's king size bed with the help of my mom. The sheets were too heavy to pull up, so my mom pulled them up with me. The same was the case for the blanket and the bed spread. I remember after pulling up the bed spread, how difficult it was to tuck it under the pillows... yet in hindsight, it was my mom who did it!

...now when I was finished, do you know what the bed looked like? From my perspective- and all others to be honest- it was perfect! No one would have known a 3-year-old had made the bed; but I did, and it filled me with happiness! Yet in reality, who really made the bed? My mom!

And so, it is with everything we do as Christians! It is received by the Lord as coming from us but accomplished by Christ and therefore Acceptable to Him! Talk about motive. Talk about a catalyst in our service! Why ought we to offer ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice to the Lord? Because in Christ — on account of His mercies — we now are acceptable to Him such that all that we do is received by God, for it ultimately has come from Christ!

That's the catalyst in all Christian service and devotion! We live our lives NOT in the hope that what we do might make us acceptable to the Lord, BUT because at all times and in all places, we are!

## References

James D. Bratt, E. (1998). *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

MacArthur, J. (1994). *Romans 9-16 MacArthur New Testament Commentary*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.

## End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> From Hebrews 12:28, we know a crucial element of this is gratitude, "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable



service with reverence and awe.”

<sup>2</sup> This was Paul’s point when he wrote to the Corinthians, “Whether, then, you eat or drink [the most mundane of all activities] or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)

<sup>3</sup> οἰκτιρμός (*oiktirmos*).

<sup>4</sup> cf. 2 Samuel 24:14; 1 Chronicles 21:13; Psalms 25:6; 40:11.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Genesis 8:21; Exodus 29:18, 25; Leviticus 1:9, 13; Numbers 15:3.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Romans 10:2-5.