

Romans: The Good News of God

Service That Makes Sense

Romans 12:1e

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Scripture

For the past few weeks we have been studying Romans 12:1-2. In Romans 12 the Apostle Paul begins applying the doctrine that he has been teaching for the previous 11 chapters. Now, it is not that he has made no application in the previous 11 chapters; he has. However, as he begins chapter 12 he is, in a sense, saying, “In light of all that I have taught, how should we then live?”

So, let’s carefully examine each phrase in Romans 12:1-2.

Let’s read Romans 12:1-2:

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, **which is your spiritual worship**. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

Introduction

The Greek words of the last phrase of verse 1 of Romans 12 have been translated in different ways. For example:

- *English Standard Version*: “which is your spiritual worship.”
- *New International Version*: “this is your spiritual act of worship.”
- *New American Standard Bible*: “which is your spiritual service of worship.”
- *King James Version*: “which is your reasonable service.”

¹ Much of this material is taken from James Montgomery Boice, *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 59-70.

- *New King James Version*: “which is your reasonable service.”

Other Bible translations are similar in their varying interpretations, which seem to fall into roughly two ways to translate the phrase. The phrase is either, “your spiritual worship,” or, “your reasonable service.”

So, what is the correct way of interpreting the Greek phrase?

Without going into a discourse about the Greek words, let me say that it is quite possible that both ideas are embraced at the same time. However, the dominant idea is more likely, “your reasonable service,” for as commentator John Murray says, “*reasonable* or *rational* is a more literal rendering.”²

So, it seems to me that the better way to understand the last phrase of Romans 12:1 is as follows: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, **which is your *reasonable service***.”

Lesson

And so today I want to examine what is involved in “your reasonable service.” I would like do so by utilizing the following outline:

1. What Is Our Reasonable Service?
2. Why Is Our Service Reasonable?

I. What Is Our Reasonable Service?

First, what is our reasonable service? Paul said, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, **which is your *reasonable service***” (12:1e; *NKJV*).

Let me review briefly what we have covered in Romans

² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), vol. 2, 112.

12:1-2. First, I examined how these verses link to the previous eleven chapters of Romans. Second, I looked at the concept of a “living sacrifice,” and explained that in Christianity we live by dying to self, as strange as that may seem. Third, I examined the nature of a “living sacrifice,” and observed that: (1) it is to be living, (2) it involves giving the various parts of our bodies to God, (3) it must be holy, and (4) if it is these things, then it will be acceptable to God. And fourth, the reason we should present our bodies as a living sacrifice is because of “the mercies of God.”

Our problem, however, is that we do not want to give ourselves to God. We will give him things. It is relatively easy to give God money, though even here we are frequently far less than generous. We will even give God a certain amount of our time. We will volunteer for ministry—providing it does not interfere with “American Idol,” or any other personal commitments!

But we will not give ourselves.

Yet without giving ourselves to God these other “gifts” mean nothing to God.

You will begin to understand the Christian life only when you understand that God does not want merely your money or your time. He wants you! You are the one for whom Jesus died. You are the one he loves. So when the Bible speaks of reasonable service, as it does here, it means that you are the one God wants.

Don’t substitute things for yourself.

A wonderful illustration of how we sometimes substitute things for ourselves is the story of Jacob’s return to his own country in Genesis 32. Jacob had cheated his brother Esau out of his father Isaac’s blessing about twenty years before, and he had been forced to run away because his brother Esau wanted to kill him.

Twenty years is a long time. Over those two decades Jacob had gradually forgotten his brother’s threats.

But when it came time to go home, which is what Genesis 32 describes, Jacob began to remember the past and grew increasingly concerned about what might happen.

Moving along toward Canaan with his uncle Laban behind

him and his own country in front of him, Jacob had time to think. He remembered his own disreputable conduct. He remembered Esau's murderous threats. Every step became more difficult. Finally he came to the ford of Jabbok that marked the border of his brother's territory, looked across to where Esau lived, and was terrified. If he could have gone back, he would have. But there was no way to go except forward.

What was he to do?

The first thing he did was send some servants ahead to see if they could find Esau and perhaps get a feeling for what he was planning to do. They had not gone very far when they ran into Esau, who was actually coming to meet Jacob. Unfortunately, he had four hundred men with him. This was a huge army from Jacob's point of view, and he could only assume the worst—that Esau was coming to kill him. He thought quickly, then divided his family, servants, and flocks into two groups, reasoning that if Esau attacked one group, the other might escape.

Ah, but what if Jacob was in the group Esau attacked?

On second thought, that didn't seem to be a very good plan, so he decided to appease his brother with gifts. First he sent him a present of two hundred female goats. He sent a servant along to drive the herd, and he gave the servant these instructions: "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.'" (Genesis 32:17-18).

After this he sent another group of twenty male goats, and he gave the servant in charge of this flock the same instructions, to say that they belonged to Jacob and were being sent as a gift to Esau, with Jacob to come after them.

Just in case Esau was not satisfied with the goats, Jacob decided to send two hundred ewes, then twenty rams. After this he sent over the rest of his livestock: "thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten

male donkeys” (32:15). Each group had its servants in charge, and to each servant he gave the same message. It must have been an amusing picture—all Jacob’s possessions stretched out across the desert going toward Esau.

But there was more. After he had sent the animals Jacob sent his least favored wife Leah with her children ahead of him across the Jabbok, followed by his favored wife Rachel with her children. Then there was the Jabbok. And then there at last, all alone and trembling, was Jacob.

James Montgomery Boice says that if Jacob had known the chorus, he might have been singing, “I Surrender All.” All the goats. All the sheep. All the camels. All the cows. All the bulls. All the donkeys. He had given everything.

But he still had not given himself.

That is what some of us do. We tell God that we will give him some time. We volunteer to help with something around the church. We give him our money. But we do not give ourselves.

That night the angel of God came and wrestled with Jacob to bring him to the point of personal submission, after which this scheming, stiff-necked man was never the same again. Personally, it seems to me that this is when Jacob was truly converted.

When is the angel of God going to come and wrestle with you? Does he need to?

II. Why Is Our Service Reasonable?

And second, why is our service reasonable?

Let’s not wait for the angel. Let’s deal with this matter of sacrificial service to God now. Let’s examine why it is reasonable to serve God sacrificially.

First, our service is reasonable because of what God has already done for us. In the earlier chapters of Romans, the Apostle Paul has clearly shown that we are all under the wrath of God, on a destructive downhill path, and unable to help ourselves. Paul has shown that we are not even inclined to help ourselves. Instead of

drawing close to God, who is our only hope, we run away from him, suppressing even the truths about God known from the revelation of himself in nature.

Yet God has not let it go at that. God intervened to save us by the work of Jesus Christ, who died for us, and by the work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to understand what Jesus has accomplished, repent of our sin, and trust him for our salvation. Then he has also joined us to Jesus Christ to make us different people from what we were before. Paul expounded on that in the letter's first eleven chapters. So now, when he gets to chapter 12, he says, "Look at what God has done. Is it not reasonable to give yourself utterly and sacrificially to a God who has given himself utterly and sacrificially for you?"

Let me make that personal. Are you a believer in Jesus Christ? Are you trusting him for your salvation? Has the Holy Spirit made you alive in Jesus Christ? If he has, what can be more reasonable than to give yourself to him? What is more logical than to serve God wholeheartedly in this way?

Second, our service is reasonable because of what God is continuing to do. Our salvation is not just a past thing. It is also a present experience, because God is continuing to work in those whom he has brought to faith in Jesus Christ. It is difficult to make changes in our lives, break destructive habits, form new ways of thinking, and please God. But this is exactly what God is doing in us. It is what this text is about. God does not start a thing and abandon it. When God starts something he always brings it to completion. He is doing this with you. Therefore, it is absurd to oppose his purposes. It is futile. The only reasonable thing is to join God and get on with what he is enabling you to do.

Third, our service is reasonable because such service is God's will for us, and his is a good and acceptable and perfect will. This point anticipates Romans 12:2, which says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Christians often get greatly hung up on the idea of discovering what God's specific will is for their lives. The Bible is clear that there are specific plans for our lives that God had determined in advance, because he has predetermined all things. The difficulty is that he has not revealed these to us. They are part of the hidden counsels of God, and they are not known by us simply because they are hidden. But although these specific details are not made known, general but very important things are, and the most important of these is that God wants us to be like Jesus Christ.

This is what Romans 8:28-29 says. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." And this is also what Paul is saying in Romans 12:2.

Sometimes we also get hung up on the idea that God's will must be something hard, difficult, or irrational. Paul corrects that error by giving us three adjectives to describe the nature of God's will.

First, God's will is *good*. God is the master of the understatement. So if God says his will is good, he means good with a capital G. He means that his will for us is the best thing that could possibly be.

Second, God's will is also *acceptable*. Certainly this means acceptable to us, since the fact that God's will is acceptable to God goes without saying. Do not say that the will of God is hard. Or difficult. Or irrational. If you are thinking along those lines, it is because you have not yet learned to surrender to it. Those who do surrender to God's will, presenting their bodies as a living sacrifice to him, find that the will of God is the most acceptable thing there can be.

Finally, Paul argues that the will of God is *perfect*. No one can say more than that. Our ways are not perfect. They can always be improved upon and often must be corrected. God's ways are perfect. They can never be made better.

So isn't it the most reasonable thing in the world to serve God and to do so without reservation, with all your heart?

Fourth, our service is reasonable because God is worthy of our very best efforts. Listen to how the Apostle John puts it in Revelation 4:11: "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

Speaking of Jesus, John says in Revelation 5:9-10: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

And again John says in Revelation 5:12: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

That is the testimony of the elders, the four living creatures, the angels, and the entire company of the redeemed. It means that God is worthy of all honor, including the very best we have to offer.

Do you believe that?

I think that is the problem. If we did believe it, we would judge it reasonable to live for Jesus now, and we would do it now and always. Instead, in many cases we only say, "Jesus is worthy of all honor," and then go out and fail to live for him. Our actions disprove our profession.

On the other hand, if you do live for him, giving God all you can ever hope to be, then you are testifying that God truly is a great God and that he is worthy of the best you or anyone else can offer.

And finally, our service is reasonable because only spiritual things will last. My last point is that it is reasonable to give everything you have for God because in the final analysis only that which is spiritual will last. Everything else—everything we see and touch and handle—will pass away. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away" (Matthew 24:35). If that is true of the heavens and the earth, it is certainly true of the small perishable things you and

I give so much of our lives for.

The Apostle John wrote the following words in his first letter: “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17). And in Revelation 14:13 he said, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

Learning to think this way is part of what it means to think spiritually. It is a start in developing a truly Christian mind.

It means that you must not compartmentalize your life. Don't think of your life as church, work, family, play, and so on. But rather think of giving your entire self to God. Every aspect of your life is to be lived for God.

The Apostle Paul said, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Every aspect of your life is to be lived for the glory of God.

So, what work you do, where you work, how you spend your time at work, every aspect of your work, is to be lived to the glory of God.

The same applies to your family, your involvement in church, your play, and so on.

Realize that only things that are done for God and his glory will last into eternity.

Conclusion

Some of you know that my call to ministry came from reading the biography of Jim Elliot. Jim Elliot was converted as a teenager. He gave himself entirely to God. Eventually, he believed that the best way to serve God was in taking the gospel to the Waodani Indians in South America. On January 8, 1956, at the tender age of 28, he was killed, along with four other young missionaries, who were trying to make contact with the Indians. Several years earlier Jim wrote a statement that summarized what Paul is saying in Romans 12:1, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot

keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Jim gave his life to God in what he judged to be the most reasonable service, and he gained a spiritual inheritance forever.

Another missionary, William Borden, came from a wealthy, privileged family, was a graduate of Yale University, and had the promise of a wonderful and lucrative career before him.

But he felt a call to serve God as a missionary in China and left for the field even though his family and friends thought him a fool for going. After a short time away and even before he reached China, Borden contracted a fatal disease and died.

He had given up everything to follow Jesus. He died possessing nothing in this world. But Borden of Yale did not regret it.

We know this because he left a note as he lay dying that said, “No reserve, no retreat, and no regrets.”

Like so many others, he found the service of Christ to be eminently reasonable, and he gained a lasting reward.

If you are not a follower of Christ today, let me say that the most reasonable thing in the world is to follow Christ. Apart from Christ you are destined for an eternal hell. I urge you to turn to Christ today in faith and repentance.

If you are a follower of Christ today, let me say that the most reasonable thing in the world is to present your bodies to him as a living sacrifice.

When you stand before God one day and you have to give an account of your life, you may have regrets that you did not live wholeheartedly for him. But I can assure you that you will have no regrets if you live your life wholeheartedly for him. It is the very best way to live. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O Lord, you call us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to you because of the mercies of God. It is our reasonable service to do so. Help us to do so fully, immediately, and completely.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.