

**Sermon for Sunday, October 24, 2010**  
**Living Sacrifices**  
**Romans 12:1-2**  
**Dr. Daniel M. Doriani**

Let's jump two months to December. Suppose you have met a couple, about your age, with similar interests. You share dinner together. Knowing a friendship may be forming, you pick a beautiful Christmas card for them and carefully choose words of blessing. They read it and say "Thank you. That's really nice. We have a card for you too. It has nice words, but there is card within the card – for two nights at a lodge you had wanted to visit. Question: What do you do when you get someone a card and they get you a three nights at a lodge? Do you say "Wait here" and go buy them tickets to the NCAA playoffs? Something vaguely like this once happened to Debbie and me. It was a very thoughtful gift. We realized that they took our relationship seriously and we should too.

When we arrive at Romans 12, Paul has finished describing God's saving gifts to mankind, a gift that is thoughtful indeed. Paul signals in every way that he wants us to take seriously our relationship with God. When he says "I urge you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies to God as living sacrifices" he describes the right response to God's gifts.

### **1. The Gift of God (Romans 1-11)**

The opening in 12:1 takes care to slow readers down, prepare us for something important: I **exhort** you, **therefore, brothers**. It's earnest and authoritative. "Therefore" draws a conclusion from God's mercies, listed in Rom 1-11.

Romans 1 begins, "In the gospel, a righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last." Why is it by faith, nothing else? Because, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven toward the godlessness and wickedness of men." **Godlessness** labels all our sins against God – unbelief, ingratitude, blasphemy, failure to worship him. **Wickedness** refers to all our sins against humanity – cruelty, deceit, selfishness, injustice and more. Yet a righteousness from God is revealed, "The just will live by faith" (1:17-18).

This gospel is necessary because, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (3:23). This sounds like one problem, but it's two.

*All have sinned* refers to deeds that violate God's standards, break his laws. God's law and his character require that we show perfect love, generosity, faithfulness, justice, respect, truthfulness. He forbids anger, lust, deceit, cruelty,

gossip, slander, and selfishness. No one meets his standards, even for a day. Yet we are accountable to Him. No one is righteous in his sight (3:20).

Second, he says all have "fallen short of the glory of God." This doesn't mean active sins like stealing or making false reports. It means we fail to find God's glory, which he wants us to share. We should show God's glory to the world by governing it well. We fall so far short of that, don't we?

The situation looks bleak because we have to answer to God the judge, who could justly condemn us. Yet he is willing to acquit us, to disregard all evidence against us and exonerate us, since Jesus bore the punishment we deserve.

More, Jesus adds his acts of love, kindness, and sacrifice to his account. And whatever good we do counts, even if it's flawed, as long as we aim to love our neighbor and please God.

As a result, we "are justified freely by God's grace" (3:24). The first principle is this: At the end of life and finally at the end of time, God calls men and women to account for all every thought, word, and deed. We stand guilty of serious offenses, but he declares us innocent, because Jesus stands with us.

So Jesus has reconciled us to God. We were estranged from him, but Jesus repaired the relationship. God requires one thing of us: we must want to restore the relationship from our side. That means we must confess our sins and grieve over them, and strive to be his loyal friends (5:1-11). Paul also describes benefits God grants to those who repent of sin and trust him. We have peace with God, the right to speak to him in prayer, and assurance of his love. If Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, how much more God loves us now that we are his children.

Once we belong to Christ, says Romans 6, we are free from bondage or slavery to sin. We still fail, but we are **able** to obey. We are united to Christ so obedience is satisfying. We can become God's instruments, tools in his arsenal.

Romans 7: We do still sin, but it isn't what we truly want to do. We battle it and there is no condemnation for those who belong to Jesus.

Romans 8 says the controlling power of sin is broken. Our mind and heart are renewed. Beyond that, God plans to redeem all creation along with us (8:17-25). This redemption is no precarious gift. Those whom God knows, he calls and justifies and glorifies. He carries us to the end of the process. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (8:28-39).

God freely offers this gospel to all. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be

saved" (10:9). Everyone who calls on the Lord will be saved (10:13). These are God's mercies. They exhort us, appeal to us, and empower us to offer ourselves to God.

## 2. Responding to the gift of God: Present your bodies

By these mercies of God, Paul appeals to us to "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (12:1). **Present** is a formal term, used of presentations, of deliberate, almost formal acts of giving gifts to God.

**Present your bodies.** The body represents the whole person, in concrete daily life – hands, feet, back. If we give the body, we give the whole person. Indeed, we are wholly God's. With the **body** we give ourselves to God in mundane acts. Our hands are our strength. Our mouth declares what is in our heart and mind. Paul could say "Serve God with 'heart' or 'spirit' but that lends to pious generalities. The body is concrete. Serve concretely.

**Pagans** dishonor God with **bodies** as they serve their desires (1:24). And sin once reigned in our mortal bodies (6:12). The body may be dead due to sin, but the Spirit gives our bodies life (8:10-11).

God takes interest in our bodies. He redeems our bodies morally; he expects us to use bodies a new way. He also will redeem our bodies eternally. When he restores all things, at end of time, he will raise perfect bodies (8:13, 23). Therefore, present your bodies to God.

**Present your bodies as a sacrifice** - described three ways:

**Living sacrifices.** There is a saying, "The problem with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar." We stay on the altar. We don't offer ourselves to God in one great act, once and done, as with Old Testament sacrifices. "Living" sacrifice means we keep on giving as long as we live.

"Living sacrifice" also implies that this sacrifice won't kill us. We fear: If I truly yield myself to God, I know he will make me a missionary to Congo. No, the Lord does not summon us to serve him in ways that violate our identity. He asks us to serve where we are, according to the abilities and interests he gave us.

**Holy:** Set apart for God, consecrated to him, adopting his standards. **Well-pleasing to God:** In light of all God has done for us, we should aim please to God. We typically want to serve God in ways that please us. In general, we like to give in ways that please *us*. At Christmas, people who like music tend to *give* music. If we like clothes, books, games, we give clothes, books, games.

Years ago, I overheard as Debbie asked our young daughters, "What are you getting Daddy for Christmas?" They whisper excitedly, "Oh we know! We're going to get Daddy a Barbie!" They had not drawn this conclusion by observing my leisure patterns. They wanted a Barbie; it was well-pleasing to **them**, so they wanted to give it to me. This is normal for a child. But adults should give what pleases the recipient. We should give God what pleases **him**. So: are you serving God in ways that please you, that demand little, or in ways that please him?

What pleases God is translated different ways: "spiritual worship" or "reasonable service." The sense of the original is this: Our service is thought out, a matter of mental and spiritual conviction, not ritual or habit. We serve with the whole spirit. Our service is reasonable not in the sense that it's merely rational, but because we think it over and it makes sense.

Christianity is not a religion of ritual – praying five times a day. It's not a default religion one that is ours because we were born under a certain ruler or because we are not Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslim. We judge the faith reasonable and right. When we consider all Jesus has done for us, mere duty is impossible. There has to be some passion.

### 3. Presenting ourselves to God – the means

Notice the form of Paul's command: **Do not be conformed** to this age, but (let yourselves) be transformed or transform yourselves by the renewing of the mind.

"Do not be conformed" is a present prohibition. It forbids, says "No" to something. It says it in the eternal present. Now, today – and every day is today - there is something you must never do.

It's also a **passive** imperative. It means things are happening to you, forces are squeezing you, exerting themselves on you. But you need to take responsibility. Resist evil forces, permit good ones.

Don't be confirmed by this age, be transformed by the renewal of your mind. Let God's truth operate on you, to transform your mind. And resist the patterns of this age. Like what? Have you noticed the brutality of our discourse? I know a pastor who leads a multi-site church. He preaches at four services out of five or six, without announcing where he will preach, so people stay with their local church. As a result, he gets anonymous hate mail every week, attacking both his decision and the speaker, from the sites where he does not speak. On-line discussions are full of venom, distortion, and insults – Christian sites, too.

We love gossip, we love to exaggerate bad news, to carry bad tales. Some are half-true, some are fabrications, and some are true but should not be repeated. I

read a headline "Star Drives Car off Cliff After Arrest." OK, I bit and read: First, the star was briefly arrested and released an hour later. Later that day, his car did go off the road over a moderately steep slope. He was not hurt. What was that headline? "Star Drives Car off Cliff After Arrest." Friends, resist all this.

It's political season. I hope all you of study the issues and the candidates, make your decisions, and vote your convictions. There are real issues. But if the mark of the Christian is love, we have to resist the hate talk. People can be wrong without being evil traitors.

So often we're blind to the issues of our age. How can I show you? A monk named Telemachus felt God called him to Rome to preach, to protest the iniquity of the city. He preached from a street corner, but no one paid him any heed. One day a crowd rushed by and he followed them to the Coliseum.

Telemachus knew of the gladiatorial games and once he entered he knew he had to protest. He leapt in with two combatants in the arena and called them to stop their bloody contest. There are two versions of what happened next. Version 1 says the gladiators stopped fighting long enough to kill him, then returned to killing each other. Version 2 says the spectators threw loose stones from the slowly crumbling coliseum and so stoned him to death.

I'd love to say this happened in 250 A.D. and that the games ended when Christianity became the Empire's dominant religion of Rome in 312 A.D. But no, the games lasted another 150 years, with respected citizens, even some Christians, attending pure murder. Telemachus arrived around 440 A.D. and his protest helped start the collapse of the games. His act galvanized people who believed the games were wrong. In a decade or so they ceased. Telemachus saw things God's way and changed the culture instead of conforming to it.

So too for our age. We need to step away from our time and protest the sins that will be as obvious to others as the gladiatorial games are to us. We need to find our blind spots. I think abortion is one. Consumerism is another.

If we have some success, we conform to our culture's vision of upper middle class life. We constantly run after new experiences and complain that we're tired. We sign our children up for everything, then complain that we never eat together. We're away thirty weekends a year, then complain that we feel distant from friends in the neighborhood and at church. Don't blame your emptiness on someone else!

Someone distinguished natural obsolescence from artificial obsolescence. Natural obsolescence occurs when plows, clothes, and toasters wear out. Artificial

obsolescence occurs when people are persuaded to throw something away because it's old and a superior product now exists.

Think too of conspicuous consumption. In the 1930s-1960s, the world's best-selling pen happened to be the best-designed pen, down to its solid Ruthenium tip. The best-selling pen cost about \$250 in today's terms. Eisenhower and MacArthur used that pen to sign the treaties ending World War II. Today? The aged speakers in my stereo recently died. I went to look for a replacement and the friendly assistant took me to a special room with speakers that cost \$1500 each, with cherry cabinet, 3,000 each. They sounded really good, but so do the \$100 speakers that I connect to my computer.

The recent recession gives us a chance to break with materialism. Surely we should know that many things are more important than adding more and more possessions. Connection to family and friends and place, time for contemplation, for walking rather than running. There is more to life than earning more, having more. Possessions demand time caring for them. I urge you: pray about this.

When Paul says, "Don't be conformed to this age" he means society can be godless. *This age* can be crass in its wickedness: drugs, drunkenness, debauchery. More often, this age simply forgets God, pushes him aside, by acting as if there is nothing but the present and the next few years of our life.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says "An unmarried believer is concerned about the Lord's affairs - how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of **this age** - how he can please his wife - and his interests are divided." Likewise "a married woman is concerned about the affairs of **this world** - how she can please her husband" 1 Cor 7:32-34.

Paul doesn't deny that married folk *should* please their husbands or wives. He *assumes* they **will**. He is saying that the desire to please a spouse can be godless, when we aim no higher than *pleasing him or her*. The highest goal is to please God and our highest duty to our spouse is to love them, not simply to please them. Out of love for their holiness, their good, we may need to displease them, in the short run.

The big idea: Polite society has many ways to bind us to this age. They are not overtly evil, but they can mislead us.

- Fitness is good, but care for the body can become a new god.
- A successful business is good, but we can pursue success at any price.
- Science and technology are good, but they can entice us to believe there is a scientific solution to every problem.

Believers never fully belong to "this age." We love all that's good in this world, but know there is more, an age to come. It has arrived, in part, in Christ. It blooms at Christ's return, but we can live by its principles now. If we **aim** to change the world, it may be elusive, but if we live well, together, we may find that we **can** change the world (especially if we're willing to endure some dissonance).

### **Be transformed by the renewing of the mind**

Most pagan religions had scant interest in role of mind in religion. Paul stresses the role of the mind in ethical life. He did not say, "Renew your mind" or "Get educated." He commanded, "Be transformed by renewing of mind." The passive voice reminds us that we can't change our mind. God must and we should let God do his work in us.

But how? The ways are familiar. First, **know Scripture**. Read the Bible. Put yourself in the way of solid teaching and preaching on Scripture, in groups large and small, in monologues and dialogues.

Second, **read and meditate** on God's truth. Turn things over in mind. Consider them. Perhaps teach them to others. Is God's wisdom shaping your life? Do you see world as it is, as God sees it? Or are you always struggling against reality, like someone who tries to get more done by sleeping four hours a day? Meditate alone and with others, in community

### **4. The blessed result of a transformed mind 12:2b**

When the Lord transforms our minds and we follow it, there are good results. When we follow the word, says Paul, " Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will" (12:2b). When we test the word, it passes.

When we obey, we are product testers. Commercials come in various forms. A minority cry out, "Test our product and you will see – it's the best!" Our towel, our diaper, absorbs more. Our detergent, our glue, our oil, is unsurpassed. When we obey God, we test his word and find that God's promises work. We will conclude, that it is true, good, and right. It pleases God and it pleases us. It's complete. It has what we need - not a direct answer for every question, every moral quandary, but principles for all of life.

When I was a professor, I had students who succumbed to pressure and cheated. I caught some; others confessed even though no one knew. And they were so glad when they did. How they accused themselves, for months, even years, for cheating while preparing to serve the Lord. How the burden of guilt

and hypocrisy fled from them when they confessed. The Bible says, "Confess your sins" and it works! All of God's word works.

### **5. The gospel as our motive for life 12:1-2**

Paul surveys his theology and says, "This is the basis for love and sacrifice for God." This is the overture to Christian living. In light of all God's mercies, we should live for him. This is our motive.

Long ago one of my children, then fifteen months, got a stomach virus. She kept nothing down for two days. She lost two pounds, but she started at seventeen pounds, she had lost 12 % of her body weight. We took her to the doctor who detected signs of dehydration and sent her to the hospital. We divided the labor. Debbie did the paper work while I kept our daughter company. The first project was to get some fluids with an IV. They strapped her down on the "baby board." I held her hand as they tried to put the needle in her arm and missed and missed again.

She held my hand; she looked at me. As the blood trickled down her arm, as they tried again, she said just one word over and over, pleading with me, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy." I could hardly stand it - tears streamed down my cheeks as they did hers. Then I felt, but did not hear, the Lord's voice speaking to me.

"You weep because you inflict this pain on your child. She sheds a few drops of blood. My Son poured out his life-blood for you. And he did not cry with the unformed mind of a one-year-old who soon forgets. He spoke with the mind of the eternal God. He knew exactly what was happening to him. Yet for you I did not heed his cry for release.

So God has done for us. In light of God's mercy, it is reasonable to offer Him our bodies, to be transformed by renewing of our minds.