

Title: Being a Living Sacrifice

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, be with us and strengthen us as we work for the coming of your kingdom, using the gifts you have given us to make this world a better place, encouraged by the Holy Spirit and your son Christ Jesus, through whom we pray. Amen.

Just prior to chapter 12 of Romans, St. Paul is explaining why Jews and gentiles are sanctified. Jews are more obvious because they are the chosen people. God made a covenant with them. The deliverer, the messiah, had to come from the Jews.

It is through Jesus' ministry that salvation came to the gentiles. Jesus brought about the reconciliation of the world. This reconciliation has put gentiles on an equal footing with Jews before God.

God is free to give gifts to anyone. God is free to show mercy to anyone. We cannot know the mind of God. We cannot second guess God. But God acts in mercy and loving-kindness to all.

That brings us to Paul's appeal. Paul is asking us, as a response to God's mercies, to present our bodies as living sacrifices. We are not like the sacrifices made at the temple. Our sacrifice is not a physical sacrifice, but a spiritual one. By presenting ourselves in this way, we are made holy and acceptable to God.

How we perceive ourselves and our place in the world is to be measured not by what we see and hear from the culture and those around us. We naturally seek like-minded groups. Everybody wants to fit in. Our culture is cruel to misfits. Though it is interesting that nerds who were once seen as misfits are now respectable because many of the richest people in the world are nerds. No matter what the culture says about social status, money is power. Money is also a tool. Money can be used for good and ill.

Paul is imploring his readers and us to put the culture aside. Paul believes that we can discern the will of God by transforming our minds. To do so, we need to shift our focus on the world and culture about us and instead focus on God. Once our focus is toward the divine, then we can be on the path to what is good and acceptable.

Rather than conform ourselves on being accepted by the culture, we are to instead conform ourselves to what is acceptable to God. What is acceptable to God is love. Paul mentions this beginning with verse nine, but implies it earlier in his argument.

Paul asks his readers for humility, which a lot coming from Paul. In some of Paul's letters, he is less than humble. If someone asks me what I think about Paul, my stock reply is that Paul was a theological genius. If you have any doubt about that just ask him.

Of course, Paul prefaces his statement about humility by saying that his request is only through the grace that was given him.

Given all of that, Paul's advice is sound. Humility goes a long way in human interactions. Humility goes a really long way when we commune with God. After all, who are we to think we are even close to being equals with God? Our response is one of a measure of faith. I, for one, have no idea how to measure faith or how God even assigns faith to people. Paul seemed to have an idea about this but Paul doesn't elaborate.

As members of the body of Christ, humility is knowing that we cannot, alone, do the ministry of the church. It takes a community. It takes all of us. Being a Christian is not a passive activity.

We are all members of the body of Christ. When Paul says we are members, he is not talking about a membership card. He is talking about a part of the body, like an arm or a leg. As each part of a body has a different function, so do each of us have a different function in the body of Christ. "We who are many, are one body in Christ." (Romans 12:5a)

Because we all have different functions in the body of Christ, no one is more important than anyone else. All parts of the body are necessary for the body to work. So, we are members of one another.

Our function in the body of Christ is made manifest through our God-given gifts. Paul lists seven gifts, though there are many more than the seven listed in Romans 12. Paul mentions many more gifts in other letters. And even that is not an exhaustive list as the Holy Spirit is not limited to any list we can devise.

These seven gifts are important to Paul and Paul must have thought them important to the Roman church. The first gift mentioned is prophecy. Prophecy is not soothsaying or fortune telling. Prophecy is truth telling, encouraging people to live rightly and with justice. Prophets attempt to turn people to God. Prophets also tend to tell people how they are failing God, which doesn't always make them very popular. The level of prophetic oracles is in proportion to faith.

Paul next lists ministry. Ministry is helping others. This is a very broad gift. It is more than giving someone a food basket, though that is a very useful ministry. It may also involve helping someone to find what is necessary to meet their needs or to educate someone to achieve the fulfillment of their needs. Maybe a fishing pole is more useful to someone than a fish.

After ministry is teaching. I think we all know of good teachers and bad teachers. A good teacher is one who has the gift of teaching. A bad teacher does not have the gift, but teaches anyway. Some people just know how to say things succinctly, while others use

many words to say nothing. Though extremely bright, Paul probably didn't have the gift of teaching.

Exhortation can also be called encouragement. Someone with this gift can encourage and motivate others to be the best they can be and be a coach and companion on the way.

Next is the giver. This is a person who understands the material needs of others and meets those needs generously. This doesn't necessarily mean money, though it often is. It may include one's energy and/or time. One with gift of giving is one who gives of themselves in an exceedingly generous fashion.

Next is leadership. Most, if not all of us, like to be in charge of something at some time. However, not all of us are good at it. Someone with a gift of leadership is one who can motivate others to work for a common goal. The Christian model of leadership is that of the servant-leader. Jesus modeled this for us. Jesus was a leader, but did so by serving others. To lead people to the kingdom of God is to serve them.

And last but not least, is compassion. Compassion is not empathy according to Paul. We can be empathetic with someone in tragedy, but we can't be empathetic with that person and cheerful at the same time. Certainly, compassion flows from empathy, but the gift of compassion is to feel someone's pain. A person with this gift does not wallow in the pain, but offers light in the darkness.

To help put this together, I will share with you The Parable of the Spilled Coffee.

A Bible study group met in a home to study how various ministries should work in the body of Christ. One member commented, "I don't understand how different gifts can work together."

At that moment, a woman accidentally dropped her cup, which broke and spilled coffee all over the floor. Each group member responded differently to the mishap, according to their spiritual gifts.

The **teacher** gave some advice. "Next time if you will put your cup on the coffee table, that won't happen again."

The **leader** responded by organizing a clean-up committee. "Bill, please go find a mop. Sally, could you help him with a towel?"

Bill, who had the gift of **ministry**, hurried to get the mop. Sally, who also had the gift of **ministry**, followed Bill and said, "I'll help you!"

The person with the gift of **exhortation** said, "We all make mistakes so don't let it get you down."

The person with the gift of **compassion** put her arm around the woman, patted her hand and said, "I feel so badly for you."

The person with the gift of **giving** exclaimed, "I'll buy a new set of coffee mugs to replace the broken one!"

They all used their various gifts together to resolve the situation.

We pray that the people of Texas and all those helping them will utilize their gifts to weather the storm and re-build afterwards.

The church is the place where the members of Christ's body become Christ to the world. Jesus' ministry did not end after the ascension. It continues to this day in the church, the assembly of the body of Christ. Every one of us were given gifts for the mission of the church. Every one of us is an important member of Christ's body.

The glue to these and all other gifts is love. So, offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, offering your gifts to God, holy and acceptable, which is your spiritual worship.

Text: **Romans 12:1–8** (NRSV)

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,^a by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual^b worship.² Do not be conformed to this world,^c but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.^d

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.¹

^a Gk *brothers*#

^b Or *reasonable*

^c Gk *age*

^d Or *what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Ro 12:1–8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.