

Romans 12:1–8, “Living Sacrifices”
9/13/20 Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Alex Amiot

Romans 12:1–8 (NKJV)

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

³ For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of *himself* more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. ⁴ For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶ Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them*: if prophecy, *let us prophesy* in proportion to our faith; ⁷ or ministry, *let us use it in our* ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; ⁸ he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

“Get behind me, Satan!” Do you remember to whom Jesus said that? He was talking to Peter. Do you remember why Jesus gave Peter such a harsh rebuke? In today’s Gospel lesson from Matthew 16, Peter was trying to convince Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, not to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and not to be killed.

It’s typically quite kind of a friend to discourage putting yourself into harm’s way. This was Peter’s idea—he knew that Jesus had enemies in Jerusalem who wanted Him dead. Now that he’s hearing Jesus plan in Matthew 16 to head to Jerusalem, fully expecting to suffer many things and even to be killed, he speaks up.

He’s a follower of Jesus, and he’s got a strong feeling about a thing, but he’s so wrong. Matthew 16:22 says, “Then Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!’”

But what if it didn’t happen to Jesus? What if Jesus didn’t endure the suffering of the cross? Then there would be no payment made for your sins, there would be no resurrection to defeat death, there would be no ascension to assure us of Christ’s lordship over all, no sending of the Holy Spirit, no promise of His return, no resurrection of the dead, no eternal life.

Thanks be to God that Jesus set His face like flint to go to Jerusalem and accomplish all these things for you and for your salvation. This was the work of the Christ that had been promised in the Old Testament.

Peter knew that God’s Word had promised a Messiah, one anointed by God to restore the kingdom and rule forever on David’s throne. And Peter even recognized Jesus as the guy. Just a few verses before today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus asked the disciples who people said He was. They gave some interesting answers on behalf of the crowds. “But who do you say that I am?” He asked the

disciples in verse 15. ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

Peter not only knew that Jesus was the promised Christ, but Peter had this knowledge in his heart and mind because God had revealed it to him. What didn’t Peter understand? How could he hold some things in his mind from God and simultaneously hold other things in his mind from Satan?

God revealed to him that Jesus was the promised Christ who would rule and reign forever. Satan planted in him the objection to Jesus suffering. What was Peter missing?

If Peter would have taken Christ’s plan to go suffer in Jerusalem and tested it against God’s Word instead of testing it against his own ideas about life, the Old Testament Scriptures would have proved to him that he was wrong and that Jesus was right.

What does the Scripture say? Isaiah prophecies of the coming servant of God, the Messiah. Read Isaiah 53. What was Peter missing? He accepted that Jesus was the Christ but rejected that the Christ should suffer. Read Isaiah 53 and test Peter’s position against how God’s Word reveals that the Messiah, the Christ, would conquer through His suffering.

Isaiah 53:5-7 prophecies of Christ, “⁵ But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.”

This is what Jesus said would happen to him in Jerusalem. This is what God revealed through Isaiah for what His people should expect the Messiah to endure. But Jesus didn’t only tell the disciples to expect His suffering. He said in Matthew 16:21 “that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.”

Is the promise of resurrection in Isaiah 53? It is! Isaiah 53:10, ¹⁰ Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put *Him* to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see *His* seed, He shall prolong *His* days, And the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.”

Jesus gave Himself as an offering for your sin, to make you God’s children, God’s offspring, God’s seed. When Isaiah 53:10 promises that the suffering servant who would be given as an offering for sin would then see His seed and prolong His days, it means that Jesus would suffer and die for sins, and then would rise from the dead and be alive to see you His dear brothers and sisters by faith, children of God.

The words of 1 John 3:1 come to mind, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” Pause and see it. Keep it in view. Consider your sin and consider how Christ sacrificed Himself for you. Amazing!

Hebrews 2:14-15 says that through His death, Jesus destroyed “the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and [He] deliver[ed] all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

If Christ did not die and if Christ was not raised, then death wins. Then we live a life of slavery to the fear of death. But by the mercy of God, Jesus died and rose and lives. In view of this mercy, how then should we live?

This is the turn that Paul makes in today’s epistle lesson in Romans 12. Just as we have seen the mercy of God toward us on account of Christ from the Gospel lesson and the Old Testament witness and the words of First John and the Letter to the Hebrews, Paul also dwelt on that mercy in the book of Romans.

In Romans our sin is brought to light in such painful and heavy detail that it’s crushing. Then the Gospel is revealed—that it was Christ who was crushed in our place. Paul delivers the comfort that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

As Paul does in so many of his letters, he first writes about salvation by the grace and mercy of God through faith in Jesus Christ, then he pivots to give instruction for how to live as saved people.

He says in Romans 12:1-2, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Paul is pleading and exhorting for the believers in the congregation in Rome to keep the mercies of God in view. In light of those mercies, “by the mercies of God,” “present your bodies a living sacrifice.”

A sacrifice at its basic level is something offered to someone you love. Something offered without strings attached. Sometimes you joyfully give of yourself, your time, your love. Other times, and often times, the selfish desires of our flesh kick against the holy desires of the Spirit of God within us, so that serving your neighbor really does become a sacrifice in the way we often think of the term—a giving up of something.

Both meanings are in view here. To present your bodies as a living sacrifice—all the time doing so with God’s mercies toward us in view—does mean that you are giving up something, and it also means that you’re offering something to someone you love without strings attached.

How do we learn to do this? We begin with faith, recognizing that it was first Christ who did this for us. He gave up His life for you whom He loves—no strings attached. Your relationship with God is based on Christ alone, not your works. But that relationship, which was formed by Christ’s sacrifice, will result in the Spirit working in you to lay down yourself as a living sacrifice for your neighbors.

Begin in your families and in your congregation. Paul says a few verses later in Romans 12:4, “⁴For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵so we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them.*”

As God places neighbors before you in your family, your congregation, your workplace, your school, your community, your world, love your neighbor as yourself. God equips each one of us with a variety of gifts to love our neighbors. Our flesh tempts us to use these gifts to serve ourselves. Paul exhorts you to keep the mercies of God toward you on account of Christ in view, then “present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service.”

A Christian from many years ago, St. John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople, commented on this passage in about the year 400 AD. Chrysostom said, “How is the body to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it has already become a sacrifice. Let the tongue say nothing filthy, and it has become an offering. Let your hand do nothing evil, and it has become a whole burnt offering. But even this is not enough, for we must have good works also. The hand must do alms, the mouth must bless those who curse it, and the ears must find time to listen to the reading of Scripture. Sacrifice allows of no unclean thing. It is the first fruits of all other actions.”

Paul goes on in Romans 12:2 to say, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” A question for you: is this verse aimed mostly at new converts to Christianity, or is it for all Christians?

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” I’ll answer the question by simply saying that this verse is for you. Just as His mercies are new every morning, so too as we keep those mercies in view, our transformation and the renewing of our mind is an every morning and every afternoon and every night kind of thing.

We don’t grow out of this need to be warned about conforming to the world and the need to be continually transformed by the renewing of our minds. Our minds have a deep rut that our way of thinking and living keeps slipping into. It’s the rut of selfish desires. It’s the rut of ignoring the needs of our neighbors and pleasing ourselves.

The world can so easily squeeze us into its mold, because that’s where the rut leads. But do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed. We have a pet monarch caterpillar at home that will very soon hang in a J-shape, shed it’s final layer of caterpillar skin, become a shining chrysalis, and then a week or two later it will be so transformed into a monarch butterfly that it will be almost unrecognizable compared to the caterpillar that it was.

For the rest of its life it will be a butterfly. But for us it’s different. That metamorphosis-transformation from living by our fleshly desires to living in view of God’s mercies and offering our bodies as living sacrifices to God for the benefit of our neighbors is a change and a growth that is continually needed in us.

His mercies are new every morning, and we need them every morning! As Luther said in the first of his 95 theses, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ He intended that the entire life of believers should be one of repentance.”

As your pastor, I do not suspect that any of you have arrived out of the chrysalis of repentance to fly forever as a butterfly, never needing further transformation. But I do, along with Paul, “beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

As you live in repentance and faith, keeping God’s mercies in view, and offering yourself as a living sacrifice to God for the benefit of your neighbor, how do you “prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God,” as Paul said?

Is it obvious, or is there a learning curve? Does it just come naturally, or does it take practice? Paul says it requires a metamorphosis of the way you think, a transforming of your mind.

Paul doesn’t suggest that knowing God’s will comes naturally. He says it requires testing, proving, to know. Too often we are so trapped in the mold of the world which is driven by what we want for ourselves, by selfish desires, that we don’t even recognize our thinking or our doing as selfish. What’s natural is for us to normalize a self-serving and worldly way of thinking and doing.

To know and do the will of God requires that we test our desires against God’s Word to prove whether they are pure or impure, holy or defiled.

What would happen if a dealer of gold and silver just paid full price for every gold or silver-looking item that was brought before him? He’d be bamboozled! If he didn’t test each piece to prove whether it was pure gold or silver, he’d be easily tricked. And when it came time for him to cash in on all the gold and silver that he paid full price for, he’d be in the hole. It would finally come to light that by not testing and proving, he had severely overvalued the fake gold and silver items.

This is us. If we don’t hunger and thirst always for a greater knowledge of God’s Word to know God’s mercy and His will, then the world is just going to suck us into its mold and we will hardly even notice. We will end up greatly overvaluing the pleasures of the world and end up in the hole.

So test your plans and your pleasures against the Word of God to prove whether they are good and acceptable and not lacking. Beginning with the Ten Commandments is helpful. And so is all of God’s Word! 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “¹⁶ All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

This is what Peter was missing. He had a great plan—to keep Jesus alive. He was probably convinced that God’s will was in line with his. But he needed to be rebuke and redirected. He needed more transformation. So do we.

As you keep God’s mercies in view, present yourself as a living sacrifice, and watch God continually transform you into the image of His beloved Son. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.