

A Living Sacrifice?

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Date: 27 January 2019

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[0 : 00] Okay, so for those of you who are part, and have been part of the congregation at least for the last six months, then you might remember that in our morning worship at the end of last year, or the last half of last year, we looked at Romans chapter 1 to the end of chapter 11, and we took a break at the end of the year, and this is us picking it up.

And it was a very clear division in the letter that Paul wrote to the church in Rome, which is part of God's word that we recognize as authority and significance for us today.

And so it was a good point to break up. And now we're taking up Romans again, Romans, from Romans 12 to the end of the letter, and that will take us through for a few weeks together.

So Callum read for us the section that we're going to look at, a brilliant section, Romans chapter 12, verses 1 to 8. Now, if you just take a look around you today in the church, just take a quick look around or at least visualize in your mind, both downstairs and upstairs, the kind of demographic of people that are here in church.

It's very probably mirroring exactly, or maybe not exactly, but it certainly mirrors the demographic of the church to which Paul was writing in Rome.

[1 : 29] We'll see that a little bit in chapter 16 when a lot of the people in the church are mentioned by Paul. So the demographic of St. Columbus is very similar to the demographic of the church in Rome.

And remember that Paul is writing this as a letter to a church. He's bringing God's Word to the church in Rome, a church just like ours.

It wasn't written as a theological treatise. It wasn't written for those who were religious or academic institutions.

It was written for God's people. And we are God's people, and therefore it's very significant and important for us because it has, excuse me, through the Spirit of God, the authority of God's message to us.

So can you look at that very important words? Actually it should be the first word, I think, really. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, because it's a, therefore, is a very important linking word in this chapter.

[2 : 39] It's a padlock word. You know what I mean by saying a padlock word? because a padlock links two different parts of a chain together. It's like a hinge word that links two things together.

It's like the button of a quote word which brings two parts of a quote together. It brings, therefore, brings together what has been said before with what is now going to be said in the rest of this letter.

It's a kind of cause and effect word, an adverbial conjunction. Am I right?

I leave that to the scholars and to the educationalists among us. But it's a linking word, okay, that is linking what's gone before with what is to come.

And if you remember, the first eleven chapters of Romans has been meaty theology. It's been quite deep, quite difficult. We've wrestled and battled with some very deep truths, remember, given to a church family, not given to a kind of theological seminary.

[3 : 48] And yet Paul sums it up here in these two words, in the light of, I appeal to you, therefore, brother, by the mercies of God. And that really is a sweeping summary of the first eleven chapters of Rome.

He's been speaking about the mercies of God, what God has done for us. That's what all that theology has been pointing to. And that's really important, that theology, the knowledge of God, the study of God, understanding God is all about understanding God's mercy and God's love for us.

So we need to keep that in mind when we are tempted to think, wow, that's not for me. This theology, the knowledge of God in the Bible is all pointing towards God and His mercy.

You know, don't give me that love me, love me, I'm thick, I can't deal with theology or theology is not for me, it's for the scholars, leave it to the academics. I just want some warm fuzzy feelings.

Because warm fuzzy feelings are great but they'll not get us very far in terms of our knowledge of a person and our knowledge of the living God. The theology of the first eleven chapters put the meat on the bones of God's mercies, God's compassion, God's pity, God's love for us.

[5 : 07] And it's really important for us to understand that if we value our lives and if we value our faith in Jesus Christ as Christians, if we are Christians.

See if you have in your home a dusty Bible and if you have a pathway of prayer that is covered overrun with weeds because of not being used, then we are in a very dangerous position of misunderstanding the whole point of Jesus in our lives.

That He is within this relationship of friendship with Him and that we are to know more about Him, the more we know Him, the more we can love Him and serve Him and worship Him in our lives. And Paul recognizes that. So he says, I appeal to you. Or he says, I urge you. It's something that's really passionate for him.

See, I appeal to you is a good translation because the word comes with the idea of a really powerful persuasive personal plea of a lawyer before a jury where he's making a very important case and he's impassioned by giving his summary of the case.

[6 : 34] There's a great film which is not quite about lawyer and juror, but it's about juror and juror, a twelve angry men. It's an old film. It's a great film if you haven't seen it, you should watch it.

It's all just set in one room with the twelve men of the jury and it's a murder trial and they need a unanimous verdict and there's eleven want to convict the person who's in the dock and there's one who believes he's innocent.

And this one person with his persuasion and passion throughout the course of the film per... Maybe he persuades. I'll not tell you. Maybe that's what happens.

I don't know. But it could be. Anyway, there's a tremendous... Sorry, I'm going to ruin a couple of films for you today. That is what's really important here that for him and for us the truth is at stake and it affects us also.

Paul says, you know, I appealed to you, I urge you. I really... It's... Sit up and take note, he says. And you know, if you're coming today and you're an inquirer, you're not a Christian, then I would ask you also to sit up and take note and consider what is spoken about here about Jesus Christ and about our lives as Christians and why that should reflect what we believe in Jesus and how it should influence us in our lives.

[7 : 51] So I'm going to say two... I'm going to speak about two things. I'm going to talk about self-sacrifice and self-reflection, because I think that covers this passage that we're looking at today.

And he begins with these really very famous words, you know, for us as Christians, I appeal to you by the message, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice wholly and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

This is a visual idea. He's giving this people, he's saying, you need to be like a whole burnt offering. These were... If they weren't Jewish people, they at least knew about the Jewish sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

And he's using that picture, he's saying, you need to be like a whole burnt offering, a consecrated offering to God, where the best of the sheep, the best of the flock was taken, it was to be expensive and costly, and it was to be a sign of your devotion and consecration and a willingness to give up everything to serve and to sacrifice for God.

It's that wholehearted consecration. Now, I'm going to use another film illustration that I was taken this week by one of my family to see the film, Stan and Ollie.

[8 : 59] Great for you. If you've been a lover, you're my age and maybe older, you love Laurel and Hardy, because you grew up with Laurel and Hardy, they were the greatest comic act of all time. And this is a great film about the latter end of their lives when they're not so popular, I'm not saying a lot about it.

But one of the real ends thing about Stan, who had Scottish roots, who's from Glasgow, his mother was from Glasgow, that's got nothing to do with anything other than putting it into its perspective. He was the writer of all the material. He did all the sketch material, all the jokes, and he did it consistently and passionately for Laurel and Hardy.

It was for the partnership he did it. Everything, the partnership to him was everything. It meant even more than their friendship, if that makes sense.

And he risked their friendship because the partnership and writing and acting and performing together mattered to him more than anything. So when Ollie died, or when Ollie retired and then died, Stan never performed again.

[10:05] He never performed without him, because to him the partnership was everything. He was completely dedicated to that partnership and sometimes with difficult and problematic implications.

But it's that self-sacrifice. Everything was devoted to that. And that's the picture here that for Christian it's not just to be part of my life, it is to be everything, and we are to devote everything and focus everything on our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Self-sacrificial in the sense of, as he says, offering up our bodies, present your bodies as a living sacrifice. What does he mean by that? Well, I think simply he's speaking about, he's countering the idea in the Greco-Roman world of the day where the body was very negative and the spirit was all that mattered, the devil, and he's saying, look, your faith isn't simply a matter of what you think or some private mystical spiritual lay-by that you drive into every so often in your life.

It's not just an ideas factory, it's not just a background philosophy. It involves our bodies, it involves where we walk and how we listen with our ears, how we look with our eyes, our daily living, whatever you do tomorrow, you're going to do it with your bodies as well as your minds.

You're going to take your bodies with you, and he says that as Christians, every part of our lives is devoted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

[11:37] It affects us at a daily level, in other words, how we treat our bodies, how we respond with our bodies, how we care with our eyes and how we look at all these things, offer our bodies as he says, living sacrifices.

Now, have you thought of that? A living sacrifice, that's a paradoxical statement, isn't it? Sacrifice of something that was killed.

This is a living sacrifice, effectively saying living, killing here. Now we know in Luke chapter 9, for example, Jesus says, deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me, it's an image, it's a picture of how He wants to live.

In other words, there is a dying in our lives, we're dying to our sinful selves, but we're coming alive in Christ and to God. It's a paradox really, as we live in Christ, and by grace we're killing our sinful, selfish separation from God and from others.

We're crushing hatred and badness, and we're coming alive to the way God intended us to live in a sacrificial way. And holy is a holy sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

[12:50] That's interesting because we think of, sometimes holy is a bit kind of pious, and sometimes maybe a bit self-righteous attitude we think sometimes of holiness.

But here the holiness is related to the mercy of God. And so that the more we understand the mercy of God, the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, the holier we will be.

Sometimes people in the church say, yeah, it's all very well talking about grace, but what about living in the right way and being right and condemning everything that's wrong?

The two are not mutually exclusive. The more we understand grace, the holier we will become. This is that radical compassion and a hatred of all the destructiveness of sin.

And so we are to have that mindset which is being sacrificial with our lives. What does that look like? What does it look like practically to be a living sacrifice?

[14:04] Well, a lot of it is wisdom. You need to work it out in your Christian life as I have to in mine. But there's two principles here that help us, a negative word and a positive word.

So He says to us that we are not to be conformed to this world, but we are to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. So body and mind, that's all of us.

So there's a negative word, don't be conformist. We mentioned that last week. That means it must be important that God wants us to hear it if He wants us to repeat it. We're not to be conformists, we're to be transformed.

See, do not be conformed. There's a great paraphrase really, I think, of this verse, J.B. Phillips translation, which says, do not let the world squeeze you into its mold.

That's really what's being said when it says don't be conformed. Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold. So there's a fact that we are non-conformists as believers, as Christians.

[15 : 05] We are to use not just our bodies, but our minds to be thinking Christians. Not simply going along with the tide, but thinking and not being conformists.

We are to live with a different cultural foundation in our lives, something we're always learning. Our mind set is to be with God rather than our mind set, when you go from here, without God.

Whether it's in our work, our marriage, our holidays, our money, our attitude to sex, to social media, how we treat people, not just our behavior, not just our actions, which is important, but the motive behind our actions is to be like Jesus and to be not to be conformed.

Jesus was a non-conformist. That should really appeal to all of us, but maybe especially to the young people who, if you're not a non... if you don't have a non-conformist kind of rebellion in your heart, then I think you should.

I think all of us, all of us, all of you in your youth, it's a good thing to be questioning, to be asking. But channel that as a young person to being a non-conformist for Jesus Christ and for the gospel in our lives.

[16 : 25] That means we need to be thinking. And it means we need thinking time. Now, I'm just going to throw in something here which will probably annoy you all, because it has... annoys me as well.

But what's the greatest enemy to... I think today to be non... to being non-conformist, or the greatest enemy to simply being a conformist in the world? Well, I do... I know it's maybe a bit... passy to say it, but I think our social media devices and the apps we have and the time we spend on them, they have become what we fill in all the empty spaces with.

Every empty moment, whether it's sitting on a bus or whether it's sitting in a room with five people in our home or whether it's going to the toilet or whatever it is, we are filling that empty time with social media.

Now, I'm absolutely as guilty of that, and probably at my age more so sometimes because it's quite exciting. But we have to think about that because it's stopping us thinking and it's stopping us talking and it's stopping us learning.

I thought about this and I'd put it in this sermon and I was thinking about it and this morning, bing, up comes in my phone the number of hours I've spent in the week on social media, horrified.

[17 : 45] I'm not going to tell you. Well, I could tell you if I look it up, I don't know if I could actually look it up just now. I don't know how to find it if it doesn't ping up, that's how good I am.

But what's really interesting about it is it breaks it down. It breaks the hours you've been on social media, on the phone or on the iPad. It breaks it down into all the areas you've used.

And having done that, I didn't feel so bad because the most thing that I was using was the Bible app. Okay, so now I feel a bit more self-righteous.

But much of it was on... There wasn't a great deal on Facebook, surfing the net. But I see that how often we can just be conforming both not just by what we do but by what we're imbibing with the philosophy of thinking behind so much of comes...

And even the secular world is recognizing that as a danger today. So we should be way ahead of the secular world in recognizing that as a danger. And that's a wisdom thing.

[18 : 47] We can't legislate for it and we would never want to. But as Christians, we need to think, how can I be a non-conformist? And how do I become aware of the dangers of the life that I'm living?

Do not be conformed but rather be transformed, he says here. That word is just the word that we get metamorphosis from and there's another great illustration of it in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 18.

And he says, And we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

So as we face, that's what being a Christian is, it's facing and knowing God through Jesus Christ. He is transforming us into His image and that's the positive side.

There's this negative side of not being conformed to the world and its thinking, but also to be transformed. There's this mind play that must go on in our lives. There's a recalib...

[19 : 48] You need to... And I need to recalibrate our minds positively towards God. A mindset doesn't come naturally with God at the heart.

The heart of our imagination, the heart of our thought process, the heart of where we begin our thinking which leads to our actions that were to be transformed there by the power of God and the Holy Spirit.

God who dwells in our thoughts and enlivens them enables us to test what God's will is. How many of you, when you're looking in your life for God, it's around the...

Around the question of His will. What does God want from me? What does He want me to be? What does He want me to do? And the more our minds are transformed, the more able we are to reason what God wants us to be and do and have the wisdom where it's not prescribed in His moral law, whatever it might be in the Bible.

So we're to be living, we're to be self-sacrificial and that leads to what I've called make sense worship.

[21 : 00] This is, He says, holy and acceptable, this is your spiritual worship or your reasonable worship. And the word there for spiritual, I'm not quite sure why they change it to spiritual because it really does mean reasonable because it's the word that we get logical from.

It's a logical, divinely logical thing to do. It's... In other words, He's saying a half-hearted response to the glory and the mercy and the kindness of God in our lives is irrational.

It's a crazy thing to do. It's miserable. Now, take Hamish and Anna. They're getting married in Saturday here. I know they're somewhere but I don't know where they are in the building.

Now you know that and we've seen it, they have this undying love for one another. It's great. We're looking forward to their wedding. Now can you imagine if... This isn't that you've got to imagine this, it's not going to happen.

Can you imagine if Hamish spent every single last penny he could get his hands on on a ring, everything he had on this ring and he chooses vows that's just going to commit everything in every way to Anna for the rest of her life.

[22 : 09] And Anna accepts the ring on the day but then changes her vows and says, well, yeah, I'll live with you one day a week and I'm glad you've given me that ring because I'm going to sell it so I can go on lots of holidays by myself.

Can you imagine that? We can't possibly imagine that. It would be totally unreasonable and completely irrational and after what Anna said here last week, we know that that would never be the case.

Anger would kind of well up within us yet. We do with God all the time. We take all His goodness and all the costly sacrifice that He's done and all the love and we mold it to satisfy ourselves so often.

Okay, I'm going to leave out a little bit here. Oh, wait, I don't know if I should. Okay, very quickly.

And this is important because it says this is wholly unacceptable and if you look at the next verse, it also says when we discern the will of God, we recognize what is good and acceptable and perfect.

[23 : 28] That word could also be translated pleasurable, what is pleasing to God. And that's great because and it's something we often forget. We often think living for God is not pleasurable and we don't find it pleasurable.

But what He's saying here is when we live like this, it pleases God and we become people who recognize God's will as something that's pleasing, that's good and lovely in our lives.

And it's not about doing God's will in order to please God or be accepted by God or be loved by God. We do it because we are already pleasing to God and we are loved and accepted.

We're pleasing to God not because of what we've done but because what Jesus has done in our place and for us. Jesus lived a pleasing, acceptable life.

We sung about it in that Psalm 15. He was perfect and we are covered in His perfect righteous, not our own. So we are already loved and pleased. We don't do it in order to be accepted.

[24 : 32] We do it because we want to please God because we are accepted. Can I give you an illustration? It's a personal one, I don't usually do this and it involves Katrina but since she's Katrina's here anyway, I've been already up the front.

I very occasionally, when things get really chaotic and usually when Katrina's away, which means it might happen quite soon, is I do the ironing. I don't do it very often but sometimes I do it.

In fact, I might not be able to do it again because the last time I did it, I dropped the iron on a brand new carpet and made a big iron mark. Some of you will say I did that deliberately. I didn't, so I wouldn't be asked again.

But I do that occasionally and there's usually a big pile of ironing in the house. But I don't do it for me in order to win Katrina's love for me.

I already know that Katrina loves me. We are committed to one another. I don't do it in order to win her love or to win her acceptance.

[25 : 36] I do it to please her because I love her and because I know she loves me. And in return, that means I actually quite enjoy doing it.

Maybe not the actual physical reality of doing it but the feeling at the end of it of having done it and knowing that she doesn't come home to pile of ironing is important.

And spiritually, it's a fruit of grace is that we do God's will not in order to earn favor with Him. He already loves us.

He already accepts us. We do it because we want to please Him for that reason and in so doing, we find pleasure in it. Eric Liddell is a great example of that.

He's quoted at the beginning in the thought for the day in the bulletin sheet. But also he said, you know, God made me fast and when I run I feel His pleasure because he knew this was what God made him.

[26 : 37] So they're self-sacrificing. And very, very briefly, there's also self-reflection and that's verses 3 to 8. I'm not really going to go into this. We've already been looking at part of this section and the gifts of the Spirit series we did at night.

But self-reflection along with self-sacrifice is also really important. We need to look at ourselves through the lens of faith. In verse 3 he says, you know, for by the grace given to me I say to every one of you, not to think more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment each according to the measure of faith God has assigned.

Now he's not saying there that you can reflect on yourself depending on the amount of faith you have, the measure of faith. He's saying, rather he's saying we measure ourselves with the eye of faith.

In light of the faith that we have in Jesus who has given himself for us. In other words, we measure ourselves by who we are as believers, as children of the Father and of brothers of Jesus Christ and sisters of Christ.

That's how we relate to ourselves. Unworthy if we look with the eye of faith because we see what Jesus has done for us, but not worthless.

[27 : 48] Please recognize that difference sometimes and mentioned this before, isn't it? It's not that we're worthless, we're unworthy, but we're not worthless because we're to think highly of ourselves.

He says, don't think more highly than you ought, but he's saying, yeah, there's nothing wrong with thinking highly of yourself in relation to Jesus Christ.

In other words, we're precious to Jesus Christ. He died for us. That's how much he cares. That's how highly we can think of ourselves, but not more highly than we should.

In other words, there should be humility in us as Christians, but not self-loathing. There shouldn't be fake humility or pride. Gospel gives us an amazing balance in our life.

Now, you all should be looking, I have to look at myself here. Don't look at the next person. Don't think about how they think. What about us in our life as believers? Not too high, he says, not too low.

[28 : 46] Use your faith in Christ as a measure. How much he loves you, and yet why he had to do what he did. We're all needy, but we're all loved. There's this great equality.

And you know, it's a famous, very, it's become a famous phrase from Tim Keller. The Gospel is this, we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe.

Yet at the very same time, we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. It's the balance of the Gospel. That's how we look at ourselves in Christ.

Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but with sober judgment. So he wants us to have a right attitude to ourselves because of what Christ, the love that Christ has shown to us. Nothing about self-loathing and nothing about worthlessness. And we're to think of ourselves, not just in relation to Christ, but in relation to the body of Christ.

[29 : 44] For as in one body, we have many members, and the members do not all have the same functions. So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

So we are part of a family that we define ourselves, not just in relation to the faith that we have and how, therefore, we think of ourselves with Christ, but also we think of ourselves as belonging in his family.

We're not simply individuals, we form one body. So the local church, St. Columbus, should reflect practically and visibly the indisputable and absolute unity of the body of Christ as a theological truth. So there's no point in you or me saying, oh, I know I'm one in Christ with every believer all over the world, but I can't stand my local church.

That's not how it works. That's a cop-out. We are to take all the faults and failings and mistakes of the local church of which we're a part, all the relationship issues, and we're to work out the fact that we are family together and work through the forgiveness that we need to offer and receive and work through the foibles and mistakes that we make, maybe especially in the leadership.

[31 : 06] We have to be done with ungodly disunity, which is usually not from a holy and a godly place.

It's a pride, hurt, self-righteousness, and meanness, sometimes in the name of God and in the name of purity. We live and practice costly forgiveness in our understanding of grace.

We are related, our identity is by being part of the family, and more than that, he says we actually belong to one another.

We belong to one another, and that's an amazing truth that we recognize. We belong to one another.

That's my phone going. That's Neil McMillan. That's terrible. What did I say about social media?

[32 : 04] In relation to the body of Christ, not only that we're part of the family, but that you and I belong to one another. We are individually members of one another.

You might find that hugely uncomfortable to your, and I might find that hugely uncomfortable to my individuality and my sense of freedom.

But it's not. And we're not to come to God and say, I belong, on my terms, with my kind of people, as long as the belonging doesn't hurt me, we belong, as he goes on to speak about all the different gifts we have, and we serve by belonging to one another.

And I guess as we teach and encourage, as we're generous, as we lead, as we're merciful, and as we're cheerful, that's the kind of things he speaks about in the gifts here. But I guess the question coming from this, both in terms of our individual identity and our understanding of what it means to be involved in the body of Christ, is what kind of church family do we want to belong to and serve in?

Not as an optional extra, because the question is not how everyone else should belong in it, but how do I belong? And what kind of belonging am I aspiring to?

[33 : 35] How can I help the health of the body of Christ? What does it look like? What a great thing is, God tells us.

And that's the next section which God willing, we'll look at next week, which gives us some practical implications of what it means to be a Christian as part of a family of Christ.

Amen. Pray. Lord God, help us, we pray, to see the meaty theology that we've been looking at over these last months, having very, very practical realities in our day-to-day living.

And may we all come to terms with this great core reality, not my will, but yours be done. And may we face that each day and see that it's the only response we can give to God who's given us everything, who's given us everything so that we may live and be forgiven and that death will have its sting removed and we will live forever in His company.

May we not think that it's worth just giving Him, giving you a tiny little part of our lives and help us to do your will and find it pleasing.

[34 : 55] And may we want to please you because of all you've done. Help us to see that and if there are any who, and we all don't see it as we should, if there are any who have never given their hearts to Christ today, we pray that they may see more clearly today than ever before who you are and how worthy you are and how we were, as we saw at the beginning of the service, that you're worthy to live for and to love and to glorify because you made us.

Help us to know that transformation in Christ. Amen.