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Romans 12:1–2

1st Message

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A NEW WAY OF LIVING

SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD

For the last nine months we have been in the gospel of Luke. But today we are going to change course and transition to Romans 12 as our primary text for the next three months. However, even though we are changing texts we will be reinforcing and expanding on some of the themes we have encountered in the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus taught and demonstrated a new way of living, a way of acceptance, compassion and love. As followers of Jesus we are to embrace the new life that Jesus modeled for us. We are a new creation in Christ and now the old is gone, the new has come. The new life that God desires us to live travels in the opposite direction of the old life that we are used to living.

My job this morning is to launch this summer series, entitled “Overcoming With Good.” This title comes from the last verse in chapter 12, which summarizes much of the chapter: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21 ESV)

The word, “overcome” in verse 21, means to conquer, to be victorious, often used in the context of military battle or legal disputes. As we know quite well from observing people and reading the news there are evil forces at work in the world. These forces are opposed to God and his kingdom. As we have been seeing in the gospel of Luke, Jesus encounters these forces—demons, sickness, death, prejudice, hypocrisy, fear, and anxiety. In the face of conflict with both invisible and visible forces Jesus overcomes all evil with acts of good. He casts out demons, heals sickness, raises the dead, calms storms, and he crosses cultural boundaries by touching a leper, healing a Gentile, forgiving a sinful woman, and entreating a hated tax collector to follow him. And then, at the end of the story, Jesus conquers sin, death, and the devil through his death and resurrection. In every situation, Jesus overcomes the evil with good, i.e. with a positive, startling, wonder-evoking action that is more powerful than the opposing force and thus he unveils the kingdom of God, demonstrates his identity as the Christ, and claims the right to be the victorious king.

Now we have also seen in the gospel of Luke that Jesus called some rather ordinary and extremely unlikely people to follow him and become his disciples. And then what does he do? He sends the disciples out to do the very good that they had observed him doing—to cast out demons, heal diseases and proclaim the kingdom of God. The disciples were being trained in overcoming evil with good in order to reveal God’s realm.

God’s plan now continues with us as disciples and followers of Jesus. We have been called by God to be his people and sent into a world that opposes his kingdom. Every day we are encountering and contending with the evil forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil—at work, in the church, with our family and friends, and in our own minds and hearts. As followers of Jesus we don’t tolerate evil, but we don’t just avoid, expose, or oppose it, but rather we overcome evil with good and in so doing we proclaim the gospel message.

In Romans chapter 8, Paul assures us that through Christ we will be more than conquerors (overcomers) in the face of tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and even death. And in Paul’s final instructions to the Romans he tells them: “I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” (Romans 16:19, 20)

Many times the evil we face will come in the form of a conflict or tension in a relationship. The evil might be external and uninvited, but what we must face is our internal evil reaction to the person or situation—self-exaltation, fear, denial, malice, hatred, or desire for revenge. However, the good we are called to do is to show compassion, kindness, and love, to the extent that we are willing to love our enemies. Jesus talked about this in his sermon on the plain in Luke chapter 6, and we will be talking about this more in Romans 12. We need to realize that our enemies are not necessarily God’s enemies. God wants us to conquer our enemies through love. That is what the cross demonstrates. God loved us and Jesus died for us while we were enemies of God and alienated from him. And thus we take up our crosses daily to do the good that God has called us to do.

Our study of the Parable of the Good Samaritan last week provides a perfect transition into our summer series. This series will require us to evaluate our relationships and ask us to do what lies beyond our own imaginations or human ability—to show compassion, grace, love, forbearance, and forgiveness through the power of the Spirit to the unlovely, the difficult, the irritating, the ones who reject us, and even our enemies. The people in our life are there by no accident. The situations in which we find ourselves are not mistakes.

Is there a difficult person in your life that you seek to avoid at all costs, someone against whom you harbor resentment and hatred, a person who you refuse to forgive? Are there people you are kind to in public, but talk critically about to friends? Can you imagine being free from these controlling tendencies and seeing others through the eyes of God’s love even though they drive you crazy or refuse to change?

This summer we will also talk about hospitality, giving, social justice, and how the church functions as a diverse community. Throughout the series people are the key and Romans 12 will challenge us to abandon ourselves to God in order to live in a new way.

And so we ask, where do we begin? How is this even possible? Well, it starts with our relationship with God and that is exactly where Paul begins in the first couple of verses. It begins with the ideas of surrender and transformation and these two ideas govern everything that 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 spiritual worship. 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. (Romans 12:1–2 ESV)

Much of the letter to the Romans has been theological and instructional up to this point, but now in chapter 12 Paul turns to practical application and exhortation. He begins chapter 12 with an appeal. This appeal is addressed to the brothers and sisters in Rome and we might assume based on chapters 9–11 and 14–15 that there were misunderstandings and tensions in this church due to the Jew/Gentile controversy that occurred in many 1st century churches. Because of Christ, Jews and Gentiles have been brought together as one to become the people of God. This provides the context for Paul's strong exhortations to brotherly love and harmony in the Christian community.

The basis of Paul's appeal is grounded in the "mercies of God," what God has done through his Son Jesus Christ in bringing salvation, redemption, and forgiveness; these are due entirely to God's mercy and grace. Mercy is the key word used in chapters 9–11, occurring four times. Paul does not appeal to fear of punishment or judgment. The primary motivating factor for how we live and how we treat people is based on our gratitude to God's grace; "God's grace, far from encouraging or condoning sin, is the spring and foundation of righteous conduct."¹ Our attitudes toward people, our treatment of people, our love for people are directly proportional to our experience of the grace of God. Jesus said something to this effect in Luke 7: "he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). On the other hand, the person who experiences the depth of God's grace and forgiveness will love much.

The content of the appeal is two-fold and it concerns both our bodies and our minds. We are exhorted to present our bodies to God and to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Being in Christ leads to a new way of living and a new way of thinking. We don't have time to look at both of these verses this morning, so I will use the rest of our time today to focus on presenting our bodies. Next week we will tackle verse 2.

Willing Surrender

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 spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

When Paul exhorts us to present our body, he uses sacrificial language. We offer our body in the way that an animal sacrifice would have been offered in the temple. Instead of bringing an animal to the altar we bring our body. The sacrifice of our body is a living sacrifice rather than a dead, animal sacrifice. That is because we have been made alive in Christ and our body is not an offering for sin, but a life-giving offering to God for others.

This sacrifice is holy and acceptable, meaning that the sacrifice of our bodies is pleasing to God, an offering that is unblemished and without defect. This is possible because we have been reconciled "in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him." (Colossians 1:22) Thus the sacrifice of our body is a fragrant aroma to God.

Offering our bodies is our "spiritual worship." The word "worship" is also a cultic word and can mean service. The word "spiritual" can either mean reasonable or rational. If "reasonable" then the "offering of ourselves to God is seen as the only sensible, logical and appropriate response to him in view of his self-giving mercy."² If

"rational" then our offering is not ceremonial or mechanical; it is the offering of our heart and minds, an act of intelligent worship.

The idea of the body is important because the Greeks viewed the body as worthless and evil. Greeks considered the human spirit to be imprisoned in the body; the body was a tomb, from which the spirit longed to escape. The body was also key because of the prevalence of culturally accepted vices such as sexual immorality. Life in Christ not only involves the heart, but also the body. We have a body now and we will have a body in eternity. The creation will be superseded by a new heavens and earth. Christianity is an embodied religion; a way of living that is incarnational. Our faith involves not just our *being* but also our *doing*.

By using the word "to present" Paul is reinforcing what he said in chapter 6: "Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness." (Romans 6:13) As a result of being united in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus we no longer have to offer our bodies to sin. We can offer our bodies to serve God and this is an act of sacrificial worship. We abandon ourselves to God so that the "values and principles, the perspectives and dynamics of God's realm of life and wholeness become incarnate in and through our being and doing"³. Just as an athlete presents her body for rigorous training and a soldier presents his body for battle, so we present our bodies to serve God as a lifestyle of worship.

What does this mean practically? It means that we willingly surrender ourselves or abandon ourselves to God out of gratitude. We voluntarily give God our whole life, and our entire being. As a follower of Jesus we offer all of ourselves in loving service to him. We do not just bring our sacrifice to the church building, but we live sacrificially in our homes and neighborhoods, during our work and play, with friends and with strangers. We don't serve just on Sundays, but we present our bodies to serve God on Mondays and Thursdays, our entire week, all fifty-two weeks of the year. We know that in our bodies there are many drives and desires. We surrender these desires to God and present our ears, eyes, hands, and our feet to God for his purposes of conquering evil with good, proclaiming the kingdom of God through an anti-world way of living.

I remember when Liz and I were younger and had little children. I would always call her before I came home from work. I would ask her if she needed me to get anything on the way home. But what I really wanted was to hear her voice, because that would tell me the state of things at home. When I heard her voice telling me that she was tired and worn thin I knew that I had to come home willing to serve even though I too was tired and just wanted to watch a ball game. And so all the way home I would pray to present my body for service—help with dinner, bathe the kids, whatever was needed. And whatever was needed always required my physical body and sacrifice. Now I call home to hear her voice after watching the grandchildren.

Presenting our bodies to God is equivalent to loving "the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.... and to love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31). As suggested by Scot McKnight, this is the creed by which Jesus lived and by which we are to live. We love Jesus more than anything else—more than our money, home, job, car, even more than our children or spouse. We love Jesus more than our addictions, our vacations, and our times of comfort and pleasure. This is the question that Jesus asked Peter on a beach in

Galilee: “do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15). The “these” is ambiguous and could include many things. If we love something more than Jesus then we will offer our bodies to worship that thing.

The goal of offering our bodies to God is to live a life of love, to do good and not evil. We are to “be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). Jesus offered his body as a sacrifice on our behalf and now we offer our bodies back to God.

When I do a wedding ceremony I talk about the nature of marriage as covenant and I say, “covenant means that you are ‘all in,’ no matter the cost.” Marriage is about giving yourself fully and completely to another person. I remember counseling with a couple years ago shortly before their wedding. They were having some real problems and so I finally asked the woman how much of her heart was she giving to the man. Her response was, about 75%. I told them they should postpone their wedding. Unfortunately they went ahead and got married and it was a disaster.

Giving only a portion of our heart and body to our spouse doesn’t work in marriage. And it doesn’t work in our relationship with God. This is why Jesus is so abrupt by telling one disciple to “leave the dead to bury their own dead” and to another, “no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60, 62). The path to a new life travels in the opposite direction of the old life. We cannot travel the two simultaneously. The important thing is that we abandon ourselves to God willingly, not willfully or grudgingly, not half-heartedly, not offering on the outside but resentful on the inside.

I have many negative illustrations, but recently I was encouraged. A couple of weeks ago I happened to be out and I saw someone that I really wanted to avoid. And so before he saw me, I ran like the coward I am. I started leaving the building and got about halfway out when God stopped me in my tracks. My first impulse was to say, “No God, don’t ask me to do that.” But I obeyed. I turned around, went back and walked up to the person. I was friendly and asked him about a situation in his life that I knew about. Once I obeyed the follow-through was very easy and pain free. An awkward and stressful moment actually became a life giving, worshipful moment. That would not have happened unless I willingly died to myself and presented my feet and mouth to the Lord for good.

In living sacrificially we do not become less, we become more. We don’t lose our life but rather we gain it. We become a human fully alive. We experience life and joy. For many years I took teams of young singles to Mexico to serve in small Mayan villages. We presented our bodies to God to build churches and homes and do vacation Bible school with the children in heat and dirt and sweat. And every year I delighted in seeing the joy and life we experienced as a team, even by those who fell ill. “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (Romans 8:6).

I know that for many of you life is a struggle. You are tired and weary, beat up and fed up, people have run you over and you are tired of trying. Believe me, I have been there and I understand. I also know that there are seasons in our life when we have to pull away in order to be renewed and refreshed in order that we might re-engage to serve again. But we have to be careful. We can’t allow our hurts and disappointments to justify unhealthy selfish behavior and resentful angry attitudes. In the end we are only hurting ourselves.

Maybe it is too hard right now to surrender yourself to God, but you might begin to pray for the desire to surrender.

I hate to stop without talking about verse 2 because deep transformation by renewing the mind goes hand in hand with presenting our bodies. But I would like us to move now into our time of communion and allow space to reflect on what we have been talking about. I would encourage you to use this time to present your bodies to God and to pray for a willing surrender. You might think about your activities today or the people you will see this week and explore what it might look like for you to abandon yourself to God in order to do good. And in order to help us, let me offer some daily prayers suggested by Robert Mulholland in his book *The Deeper Journey*:

Center yourself in God’s presence. Pray: “New every morning (afternoon, evening) is your love, and all day long you are working for good in the world.” Imagine that God is present today in everything you do and everywhere you go.

Desire to have God as the primary reality of your life during this day. Pray: “Stir up in me the desire to be yours in all things today.”

Probe your being and your doing before God. Pray: “Free me from care for myself.” Detach and release to God your anxieties, worries, things that impede your love for God. If you find yourself caring for yourself during the day, simply say, “I love you more than this, and I offer myself to you by abstaining from this indulgence.”

Abandon yourself to God: Pray: “Help me to have you as the sole content of my life today.” Orient your being to God rather than to yourself, your agenda, your purpose, your desires.⁴

1. John Stott, Romans, *Good News for the World*, IVP Press, Downers Grove, 1994, 321.

2. Stott, 321.

3. M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, IVP Books, Downers Grove, 2006, 156.

4. Mulholland, Adapted from *The Deeper Journey*, , 160-161.

