



LIFE ON THE ALTAR

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 12:1-2

23rd Message

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We began our studies in Romans with an outline that had each section of the letter open with a word starting with the letter "S". The first 2-1/2 chapters of this book, 1:1-3:20, are all about *sin*. "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," says Paul (Rom 3:23). Every one of us, bar none, is self-centered to the core. The proof of that is that we all die, because death is the result of sin.

The second 2-1/2 chapters, 3:21-5:21, are about *salvation*. At 3:21 there is an abrupt change in the apostle's thought. Paul writes, "*But now* apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested..." The situation is critical. Everyone is going to hell. *But now* the righteousness of God has been revealed. From 3:21-5:21, Paul declares the truth about our Lord's mighty saving acts.

The next three chapters, 6:1-8:39, are concerned with *sanctification*. Here we learn how to grow as Christians, how to deal with the entrenched sin in our lives, the long-term habits that hold us in their grip.

The next three chapters, 9:1-11:36, deal with *sovereignty*. These chapters are all about the nation of Israel and their place in God's plan to bring salvation to the world. The emphasis here is on God's sovereign election of his people.

Beginning with chapter 12, the next 2-1/2 chapters, 12:1-15:13, deal with *service*. This section sets out what it means to respond to the grace of God in service.

One of the most helpful features of the apostle Paul's teaching is that he always combines doctrine with duty, belief with behavior. Thus he now moves from explanation to exhortation; from an exposition of the good news to an exhortation on how this new community which Jesus has brought into being by his death and resurrection should behave. In these chapters at the end of Romans he reveals how all of our relationships have changed: our relationship to ourselves, our relationship with one another in the family of God, our relationship with our enemies, our relationship to the government, and so on.

First, our relationship to God.

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

that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2, NASB)

The opening conjunction is probably the most important connector in the Bible. Someone has said that when you see a "therefore" in Scripture, you should always ask, what is it there for? There is no more significant time to do that than here. Paul is instructing us on why we ought to behave, giving a reason for righteous behavior.

Occasionally when I tell one of my sons something I think he should do he will say to me, "Don't preach to me." They don't want me nagging them, correcting them in a condescending way. Most of the time we don't need someone telling us what we need to do; it is the "why" that needs addressing. Why should we behave? Why should we be the kind of people that God has called us to be?

Here Paul is giving us a reason for righteous behavior. He begins by saying, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God." Phillips translates it this way, "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice." God's love is the reason for our being righteous. In the opening chapters of the book Paul details that love, setting out what God has done for us. We were lost and lonely and desperate in our longing, and God became one of us. Then he died for us to bring us to God so that he can fellowship with us.

The first eleven chapters of Romans tells the story of God's love. What an enormously motivating thing it is to know that God loves us! Some think that if one focuses too much on God's grace it encourages or condones sin, but the opposite is true. John Stott comments, "God's grace, far from encouraging or condoning sin, is the spring and foundation of righteous conduct."¹

Everything starts with God's love. God loves us. Many people feel that God is mad at them. They think God is a cranky old man who is always out of sorts, that he is so insecure that when people don't respond to his love, he stomps around heaven shouting judgments, angry at everyone because they can't get it right. But no. We are deeply loved by God.

God set his love upon us in eternity, as we learned in Romans 9. He chose his people in love. No explanation of the mystery of God and his election is given, except God's love. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

We have this word in the Old Testament, from Deut 7:7-8: “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

God loves you because he loves you. That is the only explanation for his love. There is no other. He chose you because he loves you and he loves you because he loves you. He doesn't love you because you are lovely or lovable. The hymn writer put it this way: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my heart, my soul, my all.” When we understand how much God loves us we will want to give him our bodies. That is the apostle's point.

So, on the basis of God's mercy, Paul makes an appeal that involves both our bodies and our minds: the presentation of our bodies to God, and our transformation by the renewal of our minds.

You ask, Why does God want my body? The answer is, because he loves human bodies. He came to earth in a human body. He didn't come as an angel, as a disembodied spirit. He loves bodies, and he wants to indwell them. That is a uniquely Christian concept not found in other religions today. It certainly wasn't found in the religions of Paul's day. The Romans' world, influenced by Greek philosophy, taught that the body was merely a prison for the soul. There were two reactions to that thought: Either you got your body in line through discipline, or you gave up on it. Whether you were a stoic or an Epicurean, a monk or a drunk, it didn't make any difference what you did to your body. What mattered was the soul, the spiritual world.

But throughout this book Paul declares that God wants our bodies. He wants us to present the members of our bodies, our eyes, our hands, our feet, our sexual organs, to him for his use. The offering that we make to God is to say to him, “Whatever you want me to do, wherever you want me to go, I am yours.” Perhaps you are thinking, I can see why he would want some people's bodies, but not mine. My body is not attractive. Maybe you have a debilitating illness or disease that has crippled your body and you can't walk or talk. Maybe your body has been trashed by drugs. Maybe you have a sexually transmitted disease and you wonder why God would want your body. Remember that God loves broken things. He doesn't want us to fix our body or shape it up first. Bring it, with all its problems, with all the difficulty you have with it, with all the temptations, bring it just the way it is and he will fill it with his presence and put it to its intended use.

That word “present” or “offer” is significant. The word tense is often used for a once-and-for-all action. Something that we do that governs the rest of our lives. It doesn't mean that we can never do it again. Paul is

saying that there comes a time when we need to make a decision that from that point on, God is going to use our body. Our part is to say, here it is. Use it as you see fit.

Have you ever done that? This act is a sacrifice that is “holy and pleasing to God.” These words, which come from the Old Testament, refer to the sacrifices that were installed through the law. They were holy, i.e. set apart for God. Certain animals were taken off to the side and prepared for sacrifice. When they were offered, it is said that God smelled the offering and it was pleasing to him. Paul says that when we offer our bodies, that it is pleasing to God.

Furthermore, says Paul, this is the only thing that makes sense. The word that is translated “spiritual” is actually the word from which we get our word “logical.” The most sensible, logical and appropriate response to God's mercy in your life is to offer him your body. It is the greatest act of worship you can perform. I hear a lot of people talking about worship these days. They are usually referring to the music at a church service. When we come together as a church we worship corporately, but worship doesn't start or end in a church service. You are worshipping or not worshipping all week long, depending on what you do with your body. Is it God's to use right where you are — at work, in your home, with your family?

So the first part of Paul's appeal involves the presentation of our bodies to God.

The second involves our transformation according to his will. Paul writes:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).

Positively, we are to present our bodies to God; negatively, we are not to be conformed to the world. God's call to his people has always been a call to nonconformity. His word to Israel through Moses was, “You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices” (Lev 18:3). As William Barclay puts it, “We are not to be chameleons that get their color from their surroundings.”²

What does Paul mean by “world”? He is not talking about people but about the world system — the ideas and attitudes that shape our world. Human beings are naturally imitative. If we are not careful, the world will, as J.B. Phillips renders this, “squeeze us into its mold.” We must refuse to be conformed to the prevailing culture. Don't be conformed to this world.

What we should be is transformed according to God's will. We get the word metamorphosis from this word transform, meaning, a change from one form to another. We use it to describe the change that occurs when an ugly worm spins a cocoon around itself and fi-

nally breaks out as a beautiful butterfly. Matthew and Mark use this word to describe the transfiguration of Christ, when the Lord was completely changed and his garments radiated like the sun. Paul uses this word to describe the process that God wants to work in our lives. He takes us as we are, self-centered and self-absorbed, and transforms us, changing us to people who are other-centered and loving — like his Son.

The verb is also passive. An active verb means that the subject does the acting. A verb in the passive mood means that the subject is being acted upon. Paul is saying, “be being transformed.” This is the secret to change in the Christian life. It isn’t our self-determination that changes us. When we give our bodies to God and allow him to work inside us, he begins to change us from the inside out. Little by little we are being conformed to his character. As we read the word the Spirit of God begins to make it real in our lives. Paul expressed it this way in 2 Corinthians, using the same word, “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). The process of true change is simply one of looking at the face of Jesus, getting to know him, worshipping him, and loving him. The Spirit of God takes the written word to lead us to the Living Word, and as we spend time with the Lord and get to know him we are gradually transformed. When we present our bodies to him, and we make that decision to allow him to transform our character, he begins to work to accomplish that.

If you have never done so, I invite you to offer your body to God, to say to him, “Here is my body. I am finished trying to control it. Take it and do with it as you see fit.” When you do, Paul says, you will discover not only what God’s will is, but that it is good and acceptable and perfect. Most of us don’t know what to do with our bodies. We have a love-hate relationship with them, alternately trashing and treasuring them. But they will never truly please us until we give them to God. He made our bodies and only he knows what they are for. Give your body to him and he will let you know how to use it. Given God’s love for you and your body, this is the only reasonable thing to do.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my heart, my soul, my all.*

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 321.
2. William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1990) 157.