

How Shall We Then Live?

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 29, 2022.

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 (Rom. 12:1–2).¹

As the Apostle Paul concludes the eleventh chapter of his epistle to the Romans, it is as if he cannot help but sing forth in jubilant exultation: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (11:33). Concluding, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” (11:36). Amen, indeed! Who can resist joining Paul in this beautiful doxology, praising God for who he is and what he has done?

And what God has done has been clearly revealed to us, seemingly chapter by chapter of this magisterial letter. Surely, there is no other book in the bible that has the theological scope of Romans, leading John Calvin to say, “When any one understands this Epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole Scripture.”² If Calvin is right, and I think he is, Romans serves as a lens through which we see the gospel revealed in Scripture.

Consider for example that in just eleven chapters we have heard the gospel of God clearly articulated: God is perfectly righteous; we are not, and “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness” (1:18); our only hope is if God acts on our behalf, and indeed he has, sending his Son to serve as our atoning substitute, that we might be justified by God’s grace “as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (3:24-25).

In Christ alone, we are reconciled to God, not merely *like* children but *as* children. And as his children, we are guaranteed an inheritance, given his Spirit, and assured that “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, not things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39). All of this is according to God’s sovereign plan, which he is working out perfectly for our good and his glory.

Of course, there is far more that we could say, from God’s choosing and redeeming Israel, through whom he sent his Son to save his elect unto eternity, to Gentile inclusion into the church and her preparation, like a bride, waiting for her Lord’s return. But as Paul transitions in this twelfth chapter, we are reminded that the purpose of this special revelation is not merely to consume and concede but to worship God. And indeed, we gather every Lord’s Day as the church to worship, but our worship does not end on Sunday night. Our worship continues in our

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² R. C. Sproul, ed., *Reformation Study Bible-ESV* (Sanford: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2015), 1975.

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individual lives, as the whole of our lives is to be lived to the glory of God. We must not divorce Monday from Sunday, or subdivide our life into secular and sacred categories. For, if we do, we will become a knowledgeable yet lifeless people, knowing the rich doctrines of grace but not living in light of them day by day. No, when we truly have experienced the sovereign grace of God, when we truly understand the magnitude of the gospel, it will impact how we live life, not as the world but as children of God.

So, the practical question is: How shall we then live? What motivates us to live to the glory of God? How do we live life as worship? How are we to live for Christ given all of the complexities of life? In summary, we must live motivated by mercy, sacrificed to worship, and transformed to discern.

Motivated by Mercy

The mercy of God is a voluntary, divine act of God in which he does not give us what we deserve. What we deserve is condemnation but according to God's mercy what we receive is grace. As mercy is a divine act of God, it is undetermined by anyone or anything other than the sovereign will of God. God clearly says, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy" (9:15). Mercy is not warranted by man but willed by God.

Who then has been shown mercy? All who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ have been shown God's mercy, received his grace, saved as his own for eternity. For this reason, Paul says, "I appeal to you...by the mercies of God" (12:1). It is an appeal rooted in the reality of the mercy we have been shown, and it should motivate how we live our lives.

The truth is we are all motivated by something, and our flesh consistently offers many substitutes. For example, rather than God's mercy we may be motivated by man's money, valuing life by the dollar rather than eternal destiny. We may be motivated by recognition, seeking the accolades of man rather than the applause of heaven. We may be motivated by power, striving for the top rather than learning to be a servant of all. We may be motivated by pleasure, indulging the temporal at the expense of the eternal. The list goes on, but the point is we are easily motivated by the wrong things, ignoring the rich blessing of God's mercy. But when we are motivated by mercy, we experience in our lives what is ours in Christ.

If we are to be motivated by mercy, how shall we then live? Here are a few suggestions from the preceding chapters. First, remember that you deserve your wages: "for the wages of sin is death" (6:23). But all who are in Christ get not what we deserve but what God freely gives: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5). We deserve death; God gives us life.

Near the end of his life and his mind failing, John Newton could still confess "I am an old man. My mind is almost gone. But I can remember two things: I am a great sinner, and Jesus is a great Savior."³

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The New Humanity: Romans 12-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 4:1513.

Second, be grateful that you were saved by grace through faith, which was not your own doing but a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). If grace is the unmerited favor of God, how much did you merit? If faith, like grace, is a gift from God, how much did you earn? When we consider that our eternal destiny is neither merited nor earned, our response must be gratitude. As John Calvin notes, “men will never worship God with a sincere heart, or be roused to fear and obey him with sufficient zeal, until they properly understand how much they are indebted to his mercy.”⁴

Third, consistently reflect on the reality of grace’s reign in your life (5:21). In fact, just as you can do nothing to deserve God’s mercy or earn his grace, you can do nothing to forfeit his mercy or lose his grace. Since sin and death have been defeated for you by Christ, grace reigns in your life, protecting and preserving you to persevere to the end. Most assuredly, you and I can confess with Paul, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:15-16). Interestingly enough, those who are motivated by mercy also see and use their lives as a conduit of God’s mercy to others.

Of course, our flesh hates the mercy of God, not because of God’s forgiveness but because it denies self. This cannot be ignored, as if our flesh will willingly be silenced. As our ever-present foe, and hater of the gospel and the obedience it demands, our flesh will not willingly be silenced. Therefore, we must willingly and consistently offer up in worship to God ourselves as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”

Sacrificed to Worship

Paul is clearly drawing from the example of the animal sacrifices of Old Covenant worship here, but there are a number of striking differences that we must remember. First, Old Covenant sacrifices involved clean, slain, lifeless animals upon the altar of God, not living children of God. Second, Old Covenant sacrifices carried atoning significance, pointing to the final, complete sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Not only can we not atone for our sins, we must not: Christ has atoned for the sins of the elect, past, present, and future.

No, the sacrifice we offer of ourselves is both holy, or set apart, and acceptable to God for Christ’s sake. It is only through the blood of Christ that we can offer up any worship to God, but as we offer up ourselves we do so, holy and acceptable, in Christ alone (1 Pet. 2:5).

What then does Paul mean by “living sacrifice”? To answer this, we must first remember that we have died to sin. As Paul asks rhetorically, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (6:2). No, we do not engage any part of our being as “instruments for unrighteousness,” but instead we present ourselves as instruments for righteousness to God, “as those who have been brought from death to life” (6:13). And as sin is a ready reality of our fallen nature, sacrifice is the perfect metaphor for worshiping God in day-to-day life.

⁴ Ibid., 1509.

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What Paul describes is nothing short of comprehensive. As one commentator describes it, “It is not only what we can give that God demands; he demands the giver.”⁵ Our worshipful sacrifice then includes every aspect of our being. As early Church Father John Chrysostom wrote, “And how is the body, it may be said, to become a sacrifice? Let the eye look on no evil thing, and it hath become a sacrifice; let thy tongue speak nothing filthy, and it hath become an offering; let thine hand do no lawless deed, and it hath become a whole burnt offering.”⁶ Whether it be our hands and feet, our thoughts or tongues, our eyes and ears, every square inch of our being, we give to the Lord in living, breathing praise to our Creator, Redeemer, and Lord.

So, let me ask you: What have you withheld from the sacrificial altar? What have you held back or harbored, like Rachel’s idol? What have you seemingly hidden, like David’s adultery and murder? Do you not know that we live every nanosecond of our existence *coram Deo*, before the face of God? He who knows all, sees all, and for those sacrificed to worship that is a beautiful thing; so, let us worship him with all our heart, soul, mind, strength.

Transformed to Discern

This, of course, is easier said than done. We may desire to offer up ourselves as living sacrifices to God only to find that the Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Not only is our flesh weak, but the world in which we live is consistently appealing to our fleshly appetite, enticing and inviting us to conform to the mold of this evil age, rather than the will of God. It is not a matter of force but appeal, not to the body but the mind. What Paul describes is a battle for the mind of the Christian.

It is imperative then that we renew, or reprogram, our minds according to the ways of God, in contrast to the ways of the world. What we think really does dictate how we live, which is why we must not neglect the importance of the mind. John Stott argues, “anti-intellectualism ... is ... part of the fashion of the world and therefore a form of worldliness. To denigrate the mind is to undermine foundational Christian doctrines.”⁷ Christian, there is a battle for your mind, and cluttering it with the noise of news, the maelstrom of social media, the inanity of entertainment won’t lead to sanctified transformation, but it will continue conforming you to the world. Rather, “be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

The tense of the verb translated “transformed” implies an ongoing process. In other words, it is not as if your mind is instantaneously metamorphosized into the mind of Christ. Rather, like the rest of your sanctification, the transformation occurs as we are more and more conformed to Christ by the Holy Spirit. As Paul explains to the Corinthians, “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” (2 Cor. 3:18). In dependence

⁵ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 750.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 754.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *The New Humanity: Romans 12-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 4:1538.

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upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, we set our “minds on the things of the Spirit” (8:5), and this we do with purpose, that we discern, that is understand and agree with, the will of God.

As Paul uses the word translated “discern” here, he uses it not in the sense of decipher or solve but as understand and agree. Like a work of art we grow to appreciate the more we spend time with it, in it, so we mature and grow in our understanding and agreement of the will of God. As God’s will is given to us in the Son of God and revealed to us in his Word, so we mature in our understanding and grow in our agreement with God’s will as our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit’s application of it. And as this transformation takes place, we find more and more that, while we are not, God’s will is indeed good, acceptable, and perfect. And if the will of God is good, acceptable, and perfect, we must accept it as such, willingly submitting our lives to it.

How then do we set our minds on the things of the Spirit? How do we renew our minds? We go to the inspired Word of God, not merely as a point of acknowledgement but to drink from it like a spring of fresh, clean water, unadulterated and life-giving in its essence. By the help of the Holy Spirit, we imbibe. R.C. Sproul says,

God gives us the revelation of sacred Scripture in order for us to have our minds changed so we begin to think like Jesus. Sanctification and spiritual growth [are] all about this. If you just have it in your mind and you don’t have it in your heart, you don’t have it. But you can’t have it in your heart without first having it in your mind. We want to have a mind informed by the Word of God.”⁸

Christian, you ignore your bible at your own peril, for a renewed mind leads to a transformed life.

So, how shall we then live? How shall we worship God day by day in every area of life? By God’s grace, let us be motivated by mercy. You are a great sinner, but ever-greater is your Savior. According to God’s mercy, let us be sacrificed to worship. Hold nothing back; give yourself wholly and completely to the Lord. And, according to God’s mercy and by his grace, let us be transformed to discern, that we may live day by day to the glory of God.

⁸ Chris Larson, “A Renewed Mind, a Transformed Life,” accessed May 27, 2022, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/renewed-mind-transformed-life>.