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WHY GIVE YOURSELF TOTALLY TO GOD?

Romans 12:1

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Romans Lesson 76

Why Give Yourself Totally to God? Romans 12:1

A cartoon (by Ed Fisher, source unknown) pictured a huge altar, with many steps leading to the top, such as you see in the ruins of the ancient Mayan culture in Central America. At the top a priest holds a sword, ready to slaughter the next victim. Two guards are dragging a very resistant young man up the stairs to be the next sacrifice. Watching the young man resist, a man who looks like the chief comments to the man standing next to him, "The young people don't seem to believe in anything these days!"

Perhaps that is the image that comes to mind when you think about giving your body as a living sacrifice to God. You think, "Why in the world would anyone want to do that? I can see giving God an hour or two on Sundays, at least if there's nothing better to do. Maybe, if you have some extra time, like when you're retired, you can volunteer to serve in the church. I can maybe see giving God ten percent of your income, if you have anything left over after taxes and the bills are paid. I can see where some of the super-dedicated types may want to be missionaries, at least for a while. It's probably fulfilling, kind of like serving in the Peace Corps. But offering my body to God as a living sacrifice sounds pretty radical! Why would anyone want to do such a thing?"

But that is exactly what Paul calls us to do (Rom. 12:1), "Therefore I urge you, 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." That verse confronts us with the question, "Why give yourself totally to God?"

This verse begins a major new section of Romans. Chapters 1-11 emphasize doctrine, whereas chapters 12-16 focus on practical matters, although there are practical things in the first section and doctrinal issues in the second. Some may feel a sense of relief to be through with all of that difficult doctrinal stuff. They may think, "*Finally* we can get into things that apply to my life!" Or a few may feel sad that we're leaving the doctrinal section. They enjoy using their minds to trace Paul's flow of thought, much like trying to

solve some logical brain teaser. They aren't really interested in the practical section of Romans.

But both views are out of balance. To leap into the practical section without the doctrine would be like building a house without a foundation. A solid foundation may not be exciting to look at, but without it your house will not stand for long. On the other hand, to spend all of your time on the foundation and never to build the house would be useless. The whole point of laying the foundation is to build an attractive house to live in.

In other words, sound doctrine must always be the basis for godly living. The Mormons are reputed for emphasizing family life, which is a worthy emphasis. But they deny the biblical truth about the person and work of Christ (as Paul lays it out in Romans 1-11), and so they are not rightly related to God. They have a religion based on works, and they will be condemned at the judgment if they do not repent and trust in Christ alone for right standing before God. Their house has no foundation.

On the other hand, I have known men who are theologically articulate regarding the great truths of Romans 1-11, but who are mean and unloving towards their wife and children. What good is the foundation of sound doctrine if you do not build on it love for God and others as He commands? The world will mock the truth if we do not show it by our godly lives.

Thus in Romans 12-16, Paul builds on the solid doctrine of 1-11, showing us practically how to live as Christians. In 12:1-2, he sets forth our need to commit ourselves totally to God. In 12:3, he tells us how to think of ourselves in relation to God and others. Then in 12:4-21, he spells out how we are to relate in love to others. Thus the entire chapter is an exposition of the two great commandments: to love God with our total being and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. In Romans 12:1, Paul explains why you should give yourself totally to God as a living sacrifice:

Because you have experienced God's mercy,
give yourself totally to Him.

There are two things: First, the motive and then a description of the commitment that follows.

1. The motive for all Christian living is that you have experienced God's mercy in Christ.

Romans 12:1a, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God . . ." Each word in this phrase is important.

Therefore links this new section to the previous 11 chapters. In one sense, *therefore* follows directly from Romans 11:36, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." If all things are from God and through God and to God, then it follows that our lives belong completely to God. If all things are going to culminate in God's glory, then we should give our lives totally for His glory.

But there is another sense in which *therefore* relates back to everything that Paul has said in Romans 1-11. He began by showing that we all are hopelessly, helplessly lost in sin. He sums it up (Rom. 3:10-12), "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one."

If that is our true condition outside of Christ, then we all need one thing above all else: God's mercy. Paul probably uses the plural, *mercies*, because the Hebrew word is a plural with a singular meaning. God's primary display of mercy to us is at the cross, where Christ died for us as sinners. But we also experience God's manifold mercies each day in many ways (Lam. 3:22-23).

Thankfully, mercy is what God is all about. As Paul said (Rom. 11:32), "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all." None of us can claim that God owes us salvation because of our good works or for any other reason. We've all disobeyed God thousands of times. We deserve His judgment. All that we can do is cry out to Him for mercy. And as we have seen, the riches of God's abundant mercy are yours for the taking (10:13), "for 'whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"

Paul assumes that his readers have taken hold of God's great mercies in Christ, because he calls them *brethren*. All that have experienced the new birth through God's Spirit have been born into God's family. Here Paul wasn't asserting his apostolic authority,

but he put himself on the same level as them. The ground is level at the foot of the cross, where we all find God's abundant mercy.

In the same vein, he says, "I *urge* you." The Greek word comes from two words meaning, "to call alongside." The noun form is used of the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside to give us help. It can mean *exhort*, but here it seems to have the gentler sense of *urge* or *appeal*, as it is translated when Paul writes to Philemon (8-9a), "Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you..." As our loving older brother, Paul is urging us to respond to the great truth of God's mercy even as he has done, by giving our bodies totally to God as living sacrifices.

Motive is crucial in everything we do. Have you ever had someone act nicely towards you and then you found out later that he was doing it to manipulate you into doing something for him? His ulterior motive canceled everything nice that he had done. Your motive for giving yourself totally to God is crucial.

Some may dedicate themselves to God to try to work off their guilt. I once conducted a wedding with another pastor whom I had never met. As we were chatting in his office before the ceremony, I noticed his seminary degree framed on the wall. He had graduated about three years before and he was in mid-life, so I asked, "Is the ministry a second career for you?" He replied, "Yes." I followed with, "Why did you go into the ministry at this point in life?" He grimly answered, "Because I had to live with myself!" I didn't feel comfortable pursuing the subject, but the implication was that he was working off his guilt. That's a crummy reason to be a pastor!

The proper response to receiving God's mercy is to give yourself totally to Him out of gratitude. Years ago, Captain Shaw, a medical missionary with the Salvation Army in India, visited a leper colony that his mission was taking over. He saw three men with shackles on their hands and feet, cutting into their diseased flesh. Captain Shaw's eyes brimmed with tears as he told the guard, "Please unfasten the chains."

"It isn't safe," replied the guard. "These men are dangerous criminals as well as lepers!"

"I'll be responsible," said Shaw. "They're suffering enough." After the shackles were removed, he tenderly treated the men's bleeding wrists and ankles.

About two weeks later, Captain Shaw had his first misgivings about freeing these criminals. He had to make an overnight trip and he hesitated to leave his wife and child alone. His wife insisted that she wasn't afraid; God was there. The next morning she went to the front door and was startled to see the three former criminals lying on her steps. One explained, "We know the doctor go. We stay here all night so no harm come to you." These men had experienced the doctor's mercy. They responded out of love and gratitude by serving him.

Everett Harrison puts it this way (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 10:127), "Whereas the heathen are prone to sacrifice in order to obtain mercy, biblical faith teaches that the divine mercy provides the basis for sacrifice as the fitting response." The great motive for giving yourself totally to God is that you have experienced His great mercy in Christ. Have *you* experienced His mercy by calling on Him to save you? Without that, all service to God is just moralism, based on wrong motives. The only right motive is God's mercy through the gospel.

2. The basic commitment for Christian living is to give your body totally to God as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice, which is your reasonable service of worship.

Let's read our text again (Rom. 12:1), "Therefore I urge you, 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."

Paul was using a picture that was instantly recognized by everyone in that day, but is probably foreign to us. The Jews were all familiar with the ritual of taking a lamb to the temple and watching the priest slit its throat and collect the blood in a basin. After the life had ebbed out of the lamb, it was placed on the altar and burned as an offering. The Gentiles also often had witnessed animal sacrifice to the gods at pagan temples. Perhaps some of the Roman Christians had done that before they were saved.

But most of us have never watched an animal being slaughtered, even if it's for a meal. We buy our meat shrink-wrapped in the grocery store, without thinking about the animal being killed. Once in a while we read of Satan-worshippers who sacrifice an animal in a secret ceremony and it gives us the heebie-jeebies. But this picture of animal sacrifice was behind Paul's appeal here to offer ourselves, not as dead sacrifices, but as living sacrifices to the Lord. It means offering everything that you are and have to the Lord as an act of worship. Consider five aspects of this commitment:

A. This commitment is an act of the will.

It isn't automatic. It's a decision that you must think about rationally and then make. No one else can do it for you. You may have grown up in a Christian home. Perhaps you trusted Christ as a child. But as you get older and begin making your own decisions, you have to decide to give your body, your possessions, and your entire life completely to God.

I remember wrestling with this commitment as a teenager. At first I thought of it kind of like that cartoon. It wasn't my idea of a good time to give myself as a sacrifice to God. What if He wanted me to be a missionary, live in a jungle, eat grub worms, and live without indoor plumbing? I can camp for a few days, but I wouldn't want to live that way all the time! But then I thought, "If God is good and if He loves me and if He knows what is best for me, He will only ask me to do what is best for me. I'd be stupid not to entrust my entire life to that sort of God." And so I yielded all of myself and my life to the Lord.

B. This commitment is both initial and ongoing.

"Present" is in the aorist tense, which leads some to emphasize that this is a once and for all decision. But that is a simplistic understanding of the Greek aorist tense, which focuses on an action as a whole, not necessarily as a point in time. Besides, as some wag has pointed out, living sacrifices have a way of crawling off the altar. So you've got to keep renewing this commitment. You present all of yourself that you're aware of to all of God that you know. But as you grow in the Christian life, you become aware of areas in your life that are not yielded to God. So you put those things on the altar. You become aware of more about the lordship

of Christ than you knew. So you yield again and again to Him. So there is a first time when you present your entire life to the Lord to do whatever He wants you to do. But it's also progressive as you grow to understand more about yourself and God.

C. This commitment involves your body.

Paul also uses the word *present* in connection with our bodies in Romans 6:13, "And do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." (See, also 6:16, 19.) In our text, Paul may be using *bodies* to refer to the total person, but he probably wants us to think specifically about our physical bodies. In verse 2, he zeroes in on the mind, and so his emphasis on the body in verse 1 is probably deliberate.

The Greek philosophers commonly thought of the body as something evil or degrading from which an enlightened person sought to free himself. But the Christian is to view the body as a living and holy sacrifice to be offered to God for His service. The verb *present* is also used of a father giving his virgin daughter in marriage (2 Cor. 11:2). She presents her body exclusively to her husband in the marriage relationship. Even so, the Lord has bought us with His blood out of the slave market of sin, so that we are His bride. Therefore, we are to present our bodies to glorify God. At the very minimum, this applies to sexual purity (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

Our bodies also encompass our *minds*, which Paul focuses on in verse 2. It includes our *eyes* and *ears*, what we expose ourselves to through the media. Do we look at pornography? Do we look lustfully at attractive women? Do we listen to off-color jokes? The body includes our *tongues*, which we should use to praise God (Heb. 13:15) and to build up, not tear down, others (Eph. 4:29). We should use them to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Our bodies include our *hands* and *feet*. We should labor with our hands to provide for ourselves and our families (Eph. 4:28). We should use our feet to take the good news to others (Rom. 10:15) and to take us quickly away from evil (Rom. 3:15).

D. This commitment is a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice.

There is a paradox here, in that presenting our bodies to God is a positive thing, as a bride joyfully gives herself to her husband. But it's also costly, requiring all that we are and have. Jesus put it this way (Mark 8:34-35), "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." (See, also, John 12:24-25.) David Livingstone, who endured years of hardship taking the gospel to Africa, said (*David Livingstone*, [Harper & Brothers], by George Seaver p. 632), "I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us."

This sacrifice is *living*. Animal sacrifices were killed and consumed once and for all. The sacrifice of our bodies is ongoing and repeated. God has given us new life through the new birth. We now gladly offer it back to Him.

This sacrifice is *holy*. It is set apart to God. We dare not offer God a defiled sacrifice. If we have sinned, we must come to God for cleansing and then walk in obedience so that we do not disgrace the name of our Savior.

This sacrifice is *acceptable to God*. Just as the animal sacrifices were a pleasing aroma to God, so we should live so as to please Him in all that we think, say, and do. Again, the motivation to offer our bodies to God in this way is that He gave His Son for us.

E. This commitment is your reasonable service of worship.

Many translations (NASB, ESV) say, *spiritual* service, but there is another word that Paul could have used for that (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 645). He only uses this word here (the only other NT use is in 1 Pet. 2:2). It's the word from which we get our word "logical" and means "rational" or "reasonable." In light of what God mercifully has done for us, it's only reasonable that we should give ourselves totally to Him.

Service of worship (NASB) translates a single word in Greek that refers to the service of priests in the temple (Rom. 9:4; Heb. 9:1, 6). Paul is applying this word for religious worship to our everyday lives. He means that everything that we do should be offered up to God as an act of worship. Hebrews 12:28 exhorts, "Therefore,

since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe....” Hebrews 13:15-16 uses the language of sacrifice to say, “Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” (See, also, Phil. 4:18; 1 Pet. 2:5.)

Conclusion

In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Ed. by John McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles [Westminster], 3.7.1), John Calvin has a wonderfully helpful chapter, “The Sum of the Christian Life: the Denial of Ourselves.” He writes:

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.

Have you experienced God’s great mercy in Christ? Then give yourself totally to Him. To cite David Livingstone again (*ibid.*), “Forbid it that we should ever consider the holding of a commission from the King of Kings a sacrifice, so long as men esteem the service of an earthly sovereign an honor.”

Application Questions

1. Why is our motive for serving God crucial? What can happen when our motives are wrong?
2. Discuss: Is a person who claims to be saved but who won’t give himself totally to God truly saved?
3. Are certain jobs off limits to one who has given himself totally to God? What guidelines apply?
4. Is it more “spiritual” to serve God as a pastor or missionary than as a mechanic or plumber? Why/why not?

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