

Romans 12:1-8
Psalm 50

“A Living Sacrifice”
Psalm 51

December 7, 2008

In Romans 12 Paul launches a new section of Romans.

He will now talk about the “practical” side of the Christian life.

He has spent the last 11 chapters talking about the importance of Christian doctrine –
the importance of the good news of what Jesus has done.

We should remember that “doctrine” simply means “teaching.”

Doctrine is the foundation for practice.

“Teaching” is the starting point for “doing.”

Christian practice flows from Christian doctrine.

And the first practice that Paul sets forth after his 11 chapters of doctrine
is worship.

What do we worship?

As we head into the “holiday” season,

we need to think seriously about our practice.

Because our practice is rooted in what we *really* believe.

Think about what happened on Black Friday.

Ordinary Americans (perhaps even evangelical Christians)
lined up in the middle of the night outside a Walmart.
And in the frenzy to get the best bargains on the best toys,
they trampled a Walmart employee to death.

Is it true that only those who actually trampled him are guilty of his death?

After all, those who were back in the middle of the pack,
just trying to edge forward a couple spots,
wound up pushing the crowd forward,
so that those who ran over the poor fellow were
likely just trying to escape the crush themselves!

So who is guilty?

A man is dead because we love stuff more than we love people.

After all, it could have been you.

Have you ever stood in a crowd, surging forward with eager expectation?

At a concert or sporting event, trying to get the best seats?

At a store, trying to get the best deals?

Sure, if you had known that a man was being crushed to death by the crowd,
you would have stopped.

At least, you would have wanted to stop!

But how could you stop – with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people pushing?
The best you could hope to do would be to hop over the poor fellow.

Who is guilty?

The whole crowd is guilty.

And indeed, everyone who has ever loved “stuff”
so much that they were willing to participate in such a crowd.

If you have ever participated in such a crowd,
then *you* have said (by your practice) that you would be willing for a person to die
so that you could get your stuff.

Doctrine results in practice.

It always does.

Whatever *you really* believe is what you will act upon!

And so Paul says,

1. A Living Sacrifice Is Dead to the World... (v1-2)

*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. (v1)*

Therefore,

on the basis of everything that Paul has just said.

As we have seen,

Romans 3-11 is held together by Paul’s series of questions asking, “what then?”

Now Paul turns to the implications of all this.

Since you have been justified by faith – apart from works of the law (Rom 3-4),
since Christ has brought us life and righteousness through his death (Rom 5)
since you have been united to Christ in his death (Rom 6),
since we are no longer under law, but under grace (Rom 7),
since there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,
and we have received the spirit of adoption,
and thus all things work together for the good of those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8),
since God has called us (Jew and Gentile) by his Word (Rom 9-11),

therefore, Paul says,

because of these doctrines –

because of this teaching about who Jesus is and what he has done –

I appeal to you by these mercies,

because of these great blessings,

present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

What does Paul mean by a “living sacrifice”?

This is the language of worship.

All of Paul’s hearers would have been familiar with the practice of offering sacrifices.

In Old Testament theology,

a sacrifice was presented as an act of worship.

The word “sacrifice” was especially used for the peace offering.

(Occasionally “sacrifice” can be used as a blanket term for all offerings,
but most frequently it is used as a synonym for the peace offering).

The burnt offering and the sin offering were substitutionary in nature.

The animal died in my place.

But the peace offering came *after* God’s wrath was satisfied.

The peace offering does not make atonement for sin.

Rather, the peace offering (the sacrifice) is what man offers to God
after God is favorably disposed to man.

Paul has already said in Romans 3 that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice –

the propitiation for our sins (3:25),

and in 8:3 that Jesus was our sin offering.

And while elsewhere (in 1 Corinthians 5 and 10)

Paul will say that Jesus is also our peace offering,

here Paul says that we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices.

What does this mean?

First, it means that God is already satisfied by the offering of the body of Jesus.

Our presenting our bodies as living sacrifices has no atoning significance.

We cannot “add” to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

Rather, it means that because God is satisfied by the offering of Jesus,

therefore we may offer ourselves before God as living sacrifices.

Normally a sacrifice dies.

And certainly if we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices,

we are sacrificing our old way of life,

we are dying to self,

putting to death the deeds of the flesh.

But we are called to offer our *bodies* as living sacrifices.

This has to do with our behavior –
and more than just our behavior,
it has to do with our whole way of life,
including both what we *do*, what we *say*, and how we *think*.

Paul uses three adjectives to describe this sacrifice:
Living, holy, and well-pleasing to God.

First, “living”:

A dead sacrifice is useful momentarily.
It accomplishes its purpose in expressing our peace with God and then is eaten.
But a living sacrifice has an ongoing significance.
A living sacrifice is an ongoing expression of God’s peace with man.
The way you live your life –
the way you conduct yourself in your home, your community, your work,
this is the expression of the peace of God, the peace of Christ –
the fellowship of God with man that we now have in him.

I nearly said, “do *people* see this in you.”
But quite frankly, that is *not* Paul’s point.
The question is not whether you are good at “looking good” to others.
The question is what does God think?
After all, you do not present a sacrifice to man – at least, you’d better not!
Rather, you present yourselves to God as living sacrifices.
I don’t care what the people at work think of you!
What does God think of you?!

Second, you are to present yourself as a “holy” sacrifice:

Leviticus emphasized the importance of the holiness of God’s people,
the holiness God’s sacrifices, and the holiness of God’s priests.
Sometimes Israel could get too focused on outward purity,
but Psalm 50 reminds them (and us) that the *point* of this outward purity
was the inward purity of the sacrifice of thanksgiving.
“The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me;
to the one who orders his way rightly I will show the salvation of God!” (50:23)

To be a holy sacrifice means that you are set apart for God alone.
You are not double-minded – serving both God and others.
Rather, you serve the Lord Christ.

And third, you are to present yourself as a sacrifice “well-pleasing to God”:

Without holiness, no sacrifice will please God.
But a living sacrifice of thanksgiving,
offered as a part of a holy life,
this is well-pleasing to God.

Psalms 51 has sometimes puzzled people with its two statements.

First, 51:16-17 says:

“You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

But then 51:19 says that after God does good to Zion,
“then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.”

So which is it?

Does God delight in sacrifice or not?

God does not delight in sacrifices that proceed from works-righteousness.
God hates – he despises – your attempts to manipulate him.
But he delights in the sacrifices that proceed from a broken and contrite heart.
He is well-pleased when you put your trust in Jesus,
and present your bodies to him as a living sacrifice,
holy and well pleasing to God.

Hebrews 13:15-16 talks about this in a little more detail:

*Through [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God,
that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.
Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have,
for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

We often think of “sacrifice” as doing without something
(“Your parents sacrificed a lot to put you through school”).
Certainly sacrifices are costly.

But a sacrifice is not primarily “doing without.”
A sacrifice is primarily an act of worship.
Your praise to God is a sacrifice.
Your doing good and sharing what you have are sacrifices.

...which is your spiritual worship.

The word translated “spiritual” is the word from which we get our word “logical.”

It can be translated either “spiritual” or “rational” –
but either way, it is not talking about the Holy Spirit,
but about the inner part of our nature.

And given that Paul will be talking a lot about “thinking” in the coming verses,
I would suggest that “rational” might be a better translation.

Presenting your bodies – presenting yourselves – as a living sacrifice
is a rational response, it is the proper response,
for those who have received God’s mercy.

And so Paul says

*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. (v2)*

J. B. Phillips paraphrased this:

“Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould,
but let God re-mould your minds from within.”

What will form you?

What will mold you?

This world seeks to squeeze you into its mold.

That mold may change over time
(the Roman world emphasized emperor worship,
the American world emphasizes the worship of “stuff”),
but the basic premise remains the same:
the world will try to shape you
in a direction that is hostile to God.

Children,

I am concerned for you.

This world wants you to think that “stuff” will make you happy.

In the grocery store, on TV, in all sorts of ways (both subtle and obvious),
the world will tell you that new toys will bring happiness.

And often we think that we be Christians *and* have lots of “stuff.”

We can be spiritually-minded *and* worldly-minded.

But it won’t work.

If you prize “stuff” – if that is what your heart is set on this Christmas –
then you have been conformed to this world.

And you *cannot* be conformed to this world
and transformed by the renewal of your mind
at the same time.

And grown-ups,
I fear for you as well.

What is shaping you?
What is forming your heart and mind?
If you want to know the answer to this question,
look at how you act!

As you approach this Christmas season,
the celebration of the one who humbled himself and offered himself
as the atoning sacrifice for our sins,
let us offer our bodies as living sacrifices –
let us offer ourselves to God.

Okay.
So what does all this mean?
What does all this look like?

We started Romans by saying that Paul was interested in discipleship –
the obedience of faith among the Gentiles.
Paul has laid out the doctrine that is supposed to shape our lives.
Now Paul will lay out the way of life that reflects this doctrine.

2. So Do Not Think of Yourself Too Highly... (v3)

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you
not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (v3)*

The place to start is humility.
How do you think of yourself?

Paul uses the root “to think” four times in rapid succession –
all in the infinitive mood –
If I read it to you in Greek, you can hear how it sounds:

μη ὑπερφρονεῖν παρ' ὃ δεῖ φρονεῖν ἀλλὰ φρονεῖν εἰς τὸ σωφρονεῖν

In other words, *thinking* is very important.

How do you think of yourself?

Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think.

Now what does that mean?

It means that you need to recognize what God has called you to do and to be.

In verse 2 Paul had said that the reason why you need to be transformed
by the renewing of your mind,
is so that

*by testing you may discern what is the will of God,
what is good and acceptable and perfect. (v2)*

If you are going to think of yourself rightly,
then you need to understand what God has called you to do and to be.

Now, let's be clear about one thing up front:

if you are being conformed to this world,
then you *will not* think rightly about yourself.

That's why Paul says that the mind must first be renewed
as you are transformed – metamorphosized – into the image of Christ.

But as you come to see yourselves in Christ,
as you offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God,
then you will think rightly – you will think with sober judgment – about yourself
and your place in Christ's kingdom –
your place in the body of Christ.

3. But Recognize that You Are One Body... (v4-5)

*For as in one body we have many members,
and the members do not all have the same function,
so we, though many, are one body in Christ,
and individually members one of another. (v4-5)*

We'll continue to look at life in the body next week,
but today we should see that the body *must* be diverse in order to function.

Some of you have commented to me that you feel like Michiana has a lot of thinkers –
and some folks have felt intimidated by the “brain power” here.

Intellectual gifts are part of the body –
and every church should have people with intellectual gifts –
but a church that is all brains and no brawn will soon atrophy and die.

But there is a danger that people will tend to “clump” in like-minded groups.

If all the Notre Dame students “clump” together,
and all the medical people “clump” together,
and everyone forms groups that are birds of a feather,
then we will miss the point of verse 5.

*So we, though many, are one body in Christ,
and individually members one of another.*

In order for the body to function properly,
all the parts must fit together.

That doesn't mean that everyone has to know everyone equally,
but it does mean that that we are interlocking members,
we are organically connected to each other in Christ.

The thinkers and the doers need to work together.

And when we are offering our bodies as living sacrifices to God,
when we are being transformed by the renewal of our minds,
when we are thinking wisely about ourselves,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned

then we will use the gifts that God has given in a manner that pleases Christ.

4. And Use Your Gifts Accordingly (v6-8)

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:

*if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;
if service, in our serving;
the one who teaches, in his teaching;
the one who exhorts, in his exhortation;
the one who contributes, in generosity;
the one who leads, with zeal;
the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (v6-8)*

Paul uses seven aspects of church life.

Three of them have to do with teaching in some form:
prophecy, teaching and exhortation.

That should not surprise us.

Paul is the one who said a couple chapters ago,

“How are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom 10:14)

And “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17)

So teaching is important.

But teaching is never the end.

Teaching is always a means to an end –
the end (the goal of teaching) is,
as Paul has said from the beginning of Romans,
to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations,
namely, that those who hear *will believe* in the name of Jesus,
and then live lives that are obedient to that faith.

And that is why there are the other four gifts that Paul names:
service (diakonia) – ministry to one another;
contribution – if the church is going to send the gospel to the nations,
someone will have to pay for it!

Don't for a *moment* think that missionaries or pastors are “more essential” to the body
than people who have “ordinary” jobs.
That's like saying, “the mouth is more essential than the salivary glands.”
If your mouth is dry and cracked, you can't talk!

Paul says that the one who contributes should do so in generosity,
rejoicing that he is part of this body
that is bringing the gospel of Christ to the nations.
Likewise, the one who leads (literally, who stands in front)
should do so with zeal – with eagerness.

And the one who does acts of mercy is encouraged to do so with cheerfulness.
This is not just an exhortation to the deacons.
All of us are called to acts of mercy.
And showing mercy is costly.
Showing mercy is hard.
But we are called to be cheerful – this is where we get our word “hilarious” –
as we show mercy.

You may have heard pastors say that God loves a “hilarious” giver (a cheerful giver) –
well, God also calls us to the “hilarious” task – the cheerful task –
of showing mercy.

As you approach the Christmas holidays this year,
are you being conformed to the consumer's quest for stuff?
Or are you being transformed by the renewal of your mind,
so that you present your bodies as living sacrifices,
holy sacrifices,
sacrifices that are acceptable to God because you are offering him yourself!