

Sermons through

Romans

A Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1, 2

Part Two

A Walking Church Service

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
3/20/2016*

A Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1, 2

Part Two

A Walking Church Service

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service.* ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1, 2).

Introduction

We spoke last time about how our spiritual and ethical vulnerabilities can be unnerving. At what level a person self-consciously embraces the darkness it is difficult to say. It doesn't seem as if a person just wakes up one morning and decides to start breaking bad; it's more of a path which takes advantage of the world and our sin natures. And the impetus that opens the gate to the dark path can itself be very subtle – even attractive. I must say that I was pleasantly surprised recently when my nine-year-old son heard the song *Imagine* come on the radio and made the comment “How can such a beautiful song be about something so terrible?”

Another reminder of our susceptibilities is highlighted in a book by Malcolm Gladwell. As far as I know, Gladwell is not a professing Christian writing Christian books. His best-selling books do make some interesting sociological observations nonetheless. In his book *Tipping Point* he describes how trends begin. He writes of fashion trends and entertainment trends. But he makes a startling observation when it comes to behavior that has become disastrous at an epidemic level.

He writes that in the South Pacific islands of Micronesia in the early 1960s suicide was virtually unknown. But by the end of the 1980s they had more per capita than anywhere else in the world. The phenomenon was studied. Sociologists wanted to know how the “**unthinkable has somehow been rendered thinkable.**” How does a culture begin to engage in “**a contagious epidemic of self destruction?**”

A number of the young people who had unsuccessfully attempted the action were interviewed and they said they were 8 to 10 years old when they first saw or heard about it. They studied further and found that there was a high-profile young man who took his life in 1966 and that the shift from non-existent to predominant can be traced to that event.

They further found a strong correlation between the reporting of this in newspapers and suicides accelerating directly after the newspapers came out. To make a long story short, the sociological pioneer in this area, David Phillips from UC San Diego drew the conclusion that **“the decision by someone famous to commit suicide...gives other people, particularly those vulnerable to suggestion because of immaturity or mental illness, permission to engage in a deviant act as well.”** Gladwell concludes that **“people who die in highly publicized suicides serve as a Tipping Point in suicide epidemics.”**

Perhaps there is an application here to the words of Paul in Ephesians:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret (Ephesians 5:11, 12).

Neither Phillips nor Gladwell entertained, or sought to justify why they thought certain actions were deviant. I am also guessing that it never even entered their minds that they/we all might fall at some level into the category of immature or mentally ill.

Be that as it may, information like this should inform our thoughts on our own vulnerabilities. We're all vulnerable. Lots daughters were raised in a Christian household but there is little doubt that the culture in which they were raised influenced their decision to engage in highly immoral actions (Genesis 19:32).

I've often thought myself above such influence. Surely I am not so ethically malleable to allow my surroundings such great influence! Yet it wasn't that long ago that I was in New York City waiting to cross at the light when everybody simply crossed against the light. At first I thought, I will not be influenced by these law-breakers. My conviction lasted about twenty minutes before I was just part of the mob.

Think about how this influences our views of marriage, government, taxes, and issues regarding the terminating of the very young, very old, very sick the very inconvenient and so many other things – including our views of God and heaven and hell; all this to say that the transformation by the renewing of our minds is a massive project.

Review

In this short series entitled *A Living Sacrifice* we spoke of *The Need for Renewal*. We also spoke of how our pursuit of the transformation by the renewing of our minds should be done in light of the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, not in an effort to gain that love. Paul is writing of our reasonable response or reasonable service based upon the character and faithfulness of God.

A story is told of a female slave who was set free after the Civil War. She had been a slave on a plantation where the owner was a good man. He was generous, loving, patient and kind. Having been set free this woman had many options. She could seek to leave the south, find work with other plantation owners or strike off on her own and find some type of employment or living accommodations. When asked what she would like to do, she responded by pointing to her former master and saying she would like to go with him – no longer as a slave but as a free woman.

We see a similar interaction between Jesus and His followers.

No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you (John 15:15).

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life (John 6:66-68).

In light of the love, grace, mercy, wisdom and faithfulness of Christ, the thought of following a lesser master must have appeared almost absurd to Peter. Notice how the Apostle begins:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service* (Romans 12:1).

I Beseech You

It would appear that Paul recognized the inherent persuasiveness of the message. He begins chapter twelve – not with the (perhaps more powerful and certainly appropriate) “**command**” *entello*. He uses the more gentle “**I beseech you**” *parakaleo* (call to one’s side, urge). Truly God’s “**kindness is meant to lead (us) to repentance**” (Romans 2:4).

Not that there isn’t a place for more forceful language, but we are to ever be governed as a people who, though we deserve judgment, have received mercy. This should season our hearts and lips. Think of Paul’s plea to the Corinthians:

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg (*deometha* – to plead with a sense of urgency) you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Years ago in a session meeting we were addressing a person who had gone astray. We were appealing to their sense of goodness, faith, common sense and biblical conviction but they weren’t hearing it. They were committed to do what they wanted to do even though it was clearly a transgression before God. I recall not knowing what to say then one of our elders, David Kennard, simply, yet sincerely and passionately said “please don’t do this.”

By The Mercies

We have already addressed how chapters twelve through sixteen are to be obeyed in light of chapters one through eleven (hence the “**therefore**”

so I won't repeat myself here. Suffice it to say that Apostle is addressing the **"brethren"** for it is the brethren – the believer – who enjoys the **"mercies of God"**; Mercy being understood as compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.

God's mercy is foundational to His covenant with His people:

The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth,⁷ keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exodus 34:6, 7)."

If we are not objects of His mercy by grace through faith in Christ, the remainder of Romans is nothing more than good advice for a damned people. But if we are objects of His mercy, and seek to imitate that mercy in our interactions with others, we must keep in mind:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;²³ they are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22, 23).

It has been said that His mercies are new every morning because our sins are new every night. So often the word **"mercy"** *oiktirmon* is in the plural (as in Romans 12:1), indicating our continual dependence. We should live in constant recognition of our need for mercy.

A Living Sacrifice

Here the exhortation of the Apostle takes an odd turn. Perhaps we've heard it so much that it doesn't sound as peculiar as it might. We are called to present our **"bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1)**. Paul uses language prevalent in the religious cultus or community in this call to obedient living.

Let's be clear here – the context of this sacrificial call is a context of obedience. **"Bodies"** simply means the entire person since he will launch immediately into instruction on pride (Romans 12:3) and hypocrisy (Romans 12:9). We see a similar direction taken in a parallel passage:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1, 2).

This passage from Ephesians provides the groundwork disposition in the call to abstain from sexual immorality, filthy talk and so forth. We are to approach holy, obedient living as if we are on an altar where others benefit by our sacrifice. And our sacrifice, though there may be a time or place where it calls for a sacrifice of our actual lives, is a sacrifice that happens in our living – we, unlike the animal slain on the altar, are a living sacrifice.

The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart – These, O God, You will not despise (Psalm 51:17).

Whenever we engage in disobedience and rebellion against God – when we fail to love God, love our neighbor our husbands, wives, children – it is our effort to crawl off that altar. In His sacrifice, Jesus bore the sins of the world (including my own) yet we find it almost unbearable to sacrificially and lovingly put up with each other. Let us keep in mind that it is the nature of a “**sacrifice**” *thysian* to give up of oneself. The sacrifice does not stand on the altar and ask “What’s in it for me?”

Holy and Acceptable

There is some debate regarding the words “**holy, acceptable to God.**” Are we being told that the sacrifice itself, like the sacrifice of the Old Covenant needs to be without blemish? Or are we to conclude that the actions of the sacrifice ought to be holy and acceptable? Is he talking about the nature of the lamb or the actions of the lamb?

Though a distinction can be made exegetically (though difficult) there is no need theologically to make a distinction. To put it in graspable terms, we are only holy and acceptable to God in Christ. It is the sacrifice of Christ that makes us holy and acceptable to God (Hebrews 10:18-22). And

it is only because we are holy and acceptable in Christ that our works are holy and acceptable as well.

Calvin addresses it nicely:

There are then two things to be considered here, – the first, that we are the Lord’s, – and secondly, that we ought on this account to be holy, for it is an indignity to God’s holiness, that anything, not first consecrated, should be offered to him. These two things being admitted, it then follows that holiness is to be practiced through life, and that we are guilty of a kind of *sacrilege* when we relapse into uncleanness, as it is nothing else than to profane what is consecrated.¹

Reasonable Service

This verse ends with Paul’s affirmation that all of this is our **“reasonable service.”** We see a couple of words for “service” in the New Testament. Later in this chapter, for example, we learn of **“serving”** (Romans 12:7). But this is the word *diakonian* – where we get the word deacon. The word Paul uses in Romans 12:1 is *latreian*. More akin to the idea of a church service – in 9:4 it is translated **“worship”** in ESV and **“service”** in NKJV.

Not to take away from or replace our Sabbath worship – but the Christian is to view their entire life as a worship service – we are to be a walking church service – where we are on the altar – a living sacrifice.

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 12:1). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study

1. Can you think of some dark things in your culture that are presented beautifully? Explain. Give examples (page 2).
2. Discuss Gladwell's observations. Can you think of areas in your life or the lives of others that have been affected by this "tipping point" principle (pages 2, 3)?
3. Is it reasonable for us to follow Jesus? What alternatives are we presented with? How are they attractive/dangerous (pages 4, 5)?
4. How is the gospel inherently persuasive? How should having received mercy affect our disposition and language (page 5)?
5. What is mercy? How much do we need it? How should it govern us (page 6)?
6. Discuss what it means to be a living sacrifice. Can you give examples? What are some things that a sacrifice would never say (pages 6, 7)?
7. What is the debate regarding the words "holy and acceptable"? How can you be holy and acceptable to God? How can your behavior be holy and acceptable (pages 7, 8)?
8. How should our lives be like a church service (page 8)?