

Romans: The Good News of God

How to Be a Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1c-d

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

For the past few weeks we have been studying Romans 12:1-2. In Romans 12 the Apostle Paul begins applying the doctrine that he has been teaching for the previous 11 chapters. Now, it is not that he has made no application in the previous 11 chapters; he has. However, as he begins chapter 12 he is, in a sense, saying, “In light of all that I have taught, how should we then live?”

So, let’s carefully examine each phrase in Romans 12:1-2.

Let’s read Romans 12:1-2:

¹I 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. ²Do 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. (Romans 12:1-2)

Introduction

All in the Family was a popular 1970s CBS series that made the curmudgeonly Archie Bunker a household name. In one scene Archie’s son-in-law, Michael, and his wife, Gloria, are in the kitchen. Michael is eating a sandwich and Gloria is baking cookies. Gloria asks him, “Michael, do you love me?”

“Yup,” he manages in between bites.

“Would you give up your life for me?” she asks.

“Right after I finish this sandwich.”

“Ma saw this movie on TV. It takes place in the desert. The husband gives up his life so his wife can live. I was just wondering if you would do the same for me.”

¹ Much of this material is taken from James Montgomery Boice, *Mind Renewal in a Mindless Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 23-34.

“Sure, honey. If we’re ever in the Sahara desert together, you got my life. You got any pickles?”

Gloria sighs and says, “Michael, I’m serious. I mean, if we were stranded in the desert, and we had just enough water for one of us, what would you do?”

“I’d flip you for it.”

Gloria is visibly exasperated, so Michael adds: “Well honey, what do you want from me? That is a very difficult question to answer. Not many people know how they’d react in a life-and-death situation.”

“Okay, forget the desert,” she says. “Let’s say we’re out in the ocean, and there’s this shark coming at us. Would you swim in front of it to save me?”

“How big is the shark?”

“He’s big. He’s a man-eating shark.”

“Well, then maybe you should swim in front of it to save me.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a man-eating shark. You didn’t say woman-eating shark.”

At this point Gloria has about had enough. “I’m just trying to find out how much you care for me!”

“I care for you, honey. If you care for me, you’ll let me finish this sandwich.”

Gloria grabs the sandwich out of his hands and looks him in the eye glaringly: “Michael, we are lost in the mountains. This is our only food—our only chance for survival. Would you give me this sandwich?”

“I wouldn’t have to. You’d take it from me.”

“Michael! I just want to hear you say you’d give up your life for me. Would you say it?”

Gloria angrily walks out of the kitchen and into the living room. Michael follows her.

She looks back at him again, saying, “Just say you’d lay down your life for me.”

“This is ridiculous. How did we get into this?”

“Just say the words, Michael!”

Michael finally gives in, exhausted by the whole conversation. “All right! All right! I’d lay down my life for you!”²

Jesus once said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus demonstrated his love for us by laying down his life for us. Now, because of his love and sacrifice for us, he calls us who love him to do the same by presenting our bodies as a “living sacrifice.”

There is of course a tremendous difference between Jesus’ sacrifice and our sacrifice. As I mentioned in our previous study, Jesus died in our place. He paid the punishment for our sin. He bore the wrath of God in our place. He made an atonement for us.

Our sacrifices are not like that at all.

But our sacrifices are like Jesus’ sacrifice in the sense that we are the ones who are making the sacrifice. And further, the sacrifice we make is ourselves.

This is what the Apostle Paul is urging Christians to do in Romans 12:1 when he says, “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.”

Lesson

This principle of self-sacrifice is foundational to the doctrine of the Christian life. So, in our lesson today I want to examine how to be a living sacrifice.

I. Our Sacrifice Is to Be a Living Sacrifice Rather than a Dead Sacrifice

First, our sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice rather than a dead sacrifice. Paul said, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the

² *All in the Family* (Sony Pictures, 2006); DVD, Season 5, Disc 2 (episode titled “Mike's Friend”); elapsed time: 00:03:38–00:05:50.

mercies of God, to present your bodies as a **living sacrifice**” (12:1).

Can you imagine the church at Rome when they first heard this letter being read to them? This statement would have startled them. You see, they understood that a sacrifice was always to be killed. The person brought an animal to the priest. He took the animal, killed it, poured out the blood, and then burned the body.

But now Paul says that our sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice rather than a dead sacrifice. We are to offer our lives to God so that, as a result, we might “no longer live for [ourselves] but for him who for [our] sake died and was raised” (2 Corinthians 5:15).

In a previous study I said that we who are Christians belong to Jesus and not to ourselves. For as Paul said, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Pastor and author James Montgomery Boice clarifies what it means to be a living sacrifice: “We are to be living sacrifices, yes. But with what life? Certainly not our old sinful lives in which, when we lived in them, we were dead already. Rather, we are to offer our new spiritual lives that have been given to us by Christ.”³

So, the Christian life begins with new life in Christ. It begins by being a Christian. A non-Christian can attend worship services, read the Bible, give money to the church, and even serve in ministry and missions. But only a born-again Christian can give back to God that new spiritual life in Christ that he has been giving. Indeed, as Boice says, “it is only because we have been made alive in Christ that we are able to do this or even want to.”⁴

So, our sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice rather than a dead sacrifice.

II. Our Sacrifice Involves Giving Our Bodies to God

Second, our sacrifice involves giving our bodies to God. Paul said, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, **to**

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991-c1995), 1500.

⁴ Boice, 1501.

present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (12:1).

What does Paul mean when he says that we are to present our **“bodies”** to God? The great Reformer, John Calvin, whose 500th birthday we celebrate this year, wrote, “By *bodies* he means not only our skin and bones, but the totality of which we are composed.”⁵ Clearly, we are to offer the totality of ourselves.

However, it seems that the Apostle Paul stresses the word **“bodies.”** He could have said that we are “to present ourselves,” but instead he said that we are “to present our *bodies*.” That is why commentator Robert Haldane said, “It is of the body that the apostle here speaks, and it is not proper to extract out of his language more than it contains. . . . This shows the importance of serving God with the body as well as with the soul.”⁶

Paul does not elaborate upon what he means by presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice in Romans 12. But he has already presented this idea in Romans 6:12-14, where he said, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”

Paul’s point is the same in both places. We are to serve God by giving our bodies to God. But exactly how do we do this?

First, give God your mind. We often think of our minds as separate from our bodies. But our minds are part of our bodies. And living the Christian life successfully begins with the mind. I won’t spend much time on this point today because I will elaborate on the use of our minds in a few lessons. But let me just remind you of what the Apostle Paul said in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by *the renewal of your*

⁵ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 264.

⁶ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1958), 554.

mind.”

James Montgomery Boice asks a great question, “Have you ever considered that what you do with your mind will determine a great deal of what you will become as a Christian?”⁷

Do you remember the acronym GIGO? It stands for “Garbage In, Garbage Out,” and is a term used in the field of computer science. Wikipedia says that GIGO is a term “used primarily to call attention to the fact that computers will unquestioningly process the most nonsensical of input data and produce nonsensical output.”⁸ In other words, if you put erroneous data into the computer, it will produce erroneous results.

Our minds are just like that. We become what we put into our minds. So, if we fill our minds with the things of the world, we should expect that we will live like the world. If you fill your mind with trashy television, it is hardly likely that you are going to live like Christ. If you fill your mind with worthless literature, you are not going to conform your life to worthy Word of God.

So, let me make this practical for you. In order to give God your mind, make it your goal that for every non-Christian book you read that you will read one Christian book. Make it your goal to spend at least as much time reading Christian literature that you spend reading non-Christian literature.

Second, give God your eyes and ears. Sociologists tell us that by the age of twenty-one the average young person has been bombarded by 300,000 advertisements. And the basic message is that of personal gratification.⁹ Television and other modern means of communication put the acquisition of things before godliness. In fact, they never mention godliness at all. I mean, when do you ever remember an advertisement saying that you need to have a particular product because it will make you more godly? Never!

So, how are you going to present your bodies as a living sa-

⁷ Boice, 1502.

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GIGO>.

⁹ Mike Bellah, *Baby Boom Believers: Why We Think We Need It All and How to Survive When We Don't Get It* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1988), 27.

crifice if you are constantly watching television or listening to secular music?

Now, I don't believe that we should retreat from the culture. We are, however, called to bring the gospel to bear upon the culture in which we live. The problem is that too often we simply accept uncritically what our culture presents to us. Because so many people around us adopt what the culture presents to us, it becomes even harder for us to critique our culture.

So, let me make this practical for you. In order to give God your eyes and ears, make it your goal to spend as much time engaged in spiritual activities (such as reading your Bible, praying, going to church, and serving in the church) as you do watching television and listening to music and the radio.

Third, give God your tongue. The tongue is also part of your body, and what you do with it is important either for evil or for good. Jesus' brother, James, wrote, "And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell" (James 3:6).

It is so easy for us to use our tongues to tear down rather than to build up. I remember reading a story about Larry Crabb, who apparently had a severe stutter as a teenager. He attended a Plymouth Brethren Church with his family. The church he attended did not have a pastor, and the men of the church took turns leading in worship, teaching, preaching, prayer, and so on. One evening, when Larry was an older teenager, and about the time that young men were expected to start exercising leadership in the church, he attended a prayer meeting. After a while, Larry said that he felt that he was expected to pray. He nervously began to pray. And as he prayed, he stuttered. And the more he stuttered, the more nervous he became. And the more nervous he became, the more his mind went blank. He was praying all kinds of heresy because of nervousness and stuttering. Finally, he remembered to say, "Amen." As soon as the meeting was over he wanted to get out of the room as quickly as possible. He made a straight line for the door. But, out

of the corner of his eye he noticed that one of the old elders of the church was approaching him. They met at the door.

Larry thought to himself, “Oh well, I better take this as a man. I hope he will be quick with his reprimand because I am so embarrassed.”

The old elder put his arm around Larry, and slowly began to speak. “Larry,” he said, “I just want you to know that anything you do for God, I am behind you 100%.”

As you know, Larry Crabb went on to become a very gifted counselor and has authored numerous books that are very helpful to Christians. He said that those words spoken by that elder that night changed his life because they were life-giving words.

You all know the power of an encouraging word. Someone has said something to you, and it has helped you a great deal.

So, let me make this practical for you. In order to give God your tongue, make it your goal to build others up rather than tear them down. And you can do that today! And tomorrow! And the day after that!

So, our sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice rather than a dead sacrifice. Second, our sacrifice involves giving our bodies to God.

III. Our Sacrifice Is to Be Holy

Third, our sacrifice is to be holy. Paul said, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, **holy . . . to God**” (12:1).

The sacrifices that were presented to God in Paul’s day were to be spotless and pure. Anything less was an insult to God.

To be holy means to be set apart. It means to be set apart by God for God. It means that we have left our sin behind and we no longer love our sin. And when we do sin, we immediately repent of it and determine to follow after Christ. Thus, to be holy means to be entirely consecrated and dedicated to God. That is why the author of the Hebrews said, “Strive for . . . the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Scholar Handley C. G. Moule expressed this well: “As we actually approach the rules of holiness now before us, let us once more recollect what we have seen all along in the Epistle, that holiness is the aim and issue of the entire Gospel. It is indeed an ‘evidence of life,’ infinitely weighty in the enquiry whether a man knows God indeed and is on the way to his heaven. But it is much more; it is the expression of life; it is the form and action in which life is intended to come out. . . . We who believe are ‘chosen’ and ‘ordained’ to ‘bring forth fruit’ (John 15:16), fruit much and lasting.”¹⁰

We don’t talk much about holiness today. That’s a pity. Not too long ago holiness was an important matter among God’s people. Christians understood that holiness was essential to Christianity.

Reformed scholar J. I. Packer has written a book called *Rediscovering Holiness* in which he calls attention to this fact: “The Puritans insisted that all life and relationships must become ‘holiness to the Lord.’ John Wesley told the world that God had raised up methodism ‘to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.’ Phoebe Palmer, Handley Moule, Andrew Murray, Jessie Penn-Lewis, F. B. Meyer, Oswald Chambers, Horatius Bonar, Amy Carmichael, and L. B. Maxwell are only a few of the leading figures in the ‘holiness revival’ that touched all evangelical Christendom between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.”¹¹

Today holiness is not considered important for Christians. We hardly know what holiness means. We don’t try to be holy. We don’t look for it in each other. And we don’t encourage one another to live holy lives.

Just look at the seminar titles that are being promoted, and you will agree with me. You can find seminars on “How to Be Happy,” “How to Raise Children,” “How to Have a Good Sex Life,” “How to Succeed in Business,” and so on. Now there is

¹⁰ Handley C. G. Moule, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), 324-325.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992), 12-13.

nothing necessarily wrong with these things. They have their place. It is just that you are not likely to find a seminar titled, “How to Be a Living Sacrifice.”

Fortunately, this lack has begun to be noticed by some evangelical leaders who are disturbed by it and have begun to address the subject. I recommend Packer’s book to you. I also recommend a book by Jerry Bridges called *The Pursuit of Holiness*. And my favorite book on holiness is simply titled *Holiness* by Bishop J. C. Ryle. Although written in the 19th century, it is a classic.

So, our sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice rather than a dead sacrifice. Second, our sacrifice involves giving our bodies to God. Third, our sacrifice is to be holy.

IV. Our Sacrifice Is to Be Acceptable

And fourth, our sacrifice is to be acceptable. Paul said, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and **acceptable to God**” (12:1).

If you do what Paul is urging you to do, “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy . . . to God,” then you will find that your sacrifice is acceptable to God.

So, our sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice rather than a dead sacrifice. Second, our sacrifice involves giving our bodies to God. Third, our sacrifice is to be holy. And fourth, our sacrifice is to be acceptable.

Conclusion

Living for Christ may be hard. It always will be in this sinful, God-defying world. I may not understand what good it does either for me or for other people. But the commendation and praise of the Lord Jesus Christ will be enough for me. It will make it worthwhile. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

O Lord, you call us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to you. Help us to do so fully, immediately, and completely.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.