

Romans 12:1-10
(Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 5:13-20)
“A Living Sacrifice”

Introduction

You and I are on a journey, whether or not we choose to be, and we will either be carried along by the currents of our culture, our old habits and routines, or we will intentionally chart a new course, toward becoming the people that we have always known deep inside that we long to be, because we know that we were created to be so much more than we have yet become.

Why is it that we settle for so much less? Why are we, who believe that God has offered us so much in Christ, still willing year after year to settle for so little? Is it not because we also want many other things that we suspect may be incompatible with the claims of Christ? Or is it, perhaps, because we have tried the path of transformation before, only to be disappointed at our lack of progress? Everything in our culture, particularly the messages presented so seductively in the various media through which our senses swim each day, conspires to tell us that we can have what we want with little time and effort, if only we are willing to pay with cash or credit card. Yet we know, in our more reflective moments, that nothing of value comes easily or cheaply. Even grace, which is by definition free, is anything but cheap.

Paul reminds us in our text that new beginnings are only possible because of God's mercy toward us. God alone can forgive our sins and heal our brokenness, guilt and shame. He alone can empower us to think and live differently than we ever have before. But he has appointed certain means by which we experience his transforming presence and power. If we do not avail ourselves of his grace, we will once again be disappointed in our hopes. Here is the point where we are challenged to turn and swim against the cultural stream. Here we are invited into the adventure of a lifetime if only we will take our eternal destiny as seriously as we Americans tend to take our entertainments.

How, in Jeremiah's words, do we experience this new covenant written on our hearts? How, in Jesus' words, do we let our light shine so that God gets glory through us? God, in his mercy, has done for us what we could not do for ourselves and has given us *in Christ* all the means necessary to do the rest, all we need to launch out into the adventure of a new beginning. The question is whether or not we will respond to the divine initiative, and begin to pursue those means of grace in an intentional, consistent way, not as ends in themselves, not as religious performance, not as what we must do to earn God's grace, but rather as the spiritual food and drink that make strong the new life that God has put within us. Where do we begin? How are we to know the joy and power of “a long obedience in the same direction”?

Body

1. Give your body to the Lord.

Most religions and philosophies teach that the body is evil, that it is a hindrance to knowing God, to knowing truth and living righteously. But the Bible teaches that the body is the very vehicle of our spiritual growth, if only we will give it the Lord who created it, and ask him to make it his temple. This is what God desires: people who are willing to give him flesh and do his will, so that his kingdom increasingly comes and his will is increasingly done on earth as in heaven. Paul says that this offering of our *bodies* is in fact our *spiritual* act of worship.

Dallas Willard has made this point very powerfully in his book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, where he reminds us that in order to save us, God's Son took on the flesh of a human body, ministered through the means of that body, offered his body on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin, and God raised up that body in victory over sin and death. The Son of God has linked himself to us for all eternity, as he resumed his place at the Father's right hand in glorified human flesh. He has demonstrated the dignity and honor for which the body was created and is being redeemed. God will one day raise our bodies up new and glorious like the glorified body of our Lord Jesus and he wants his people to give back to him even now what he created for his glory and for our good.

How do we experience this? Let me ask a question: Where are you least inclined to give God Lordship over your body? Which of your appetites is most clearly refusing to submit to God's will? Perhaps it is an unbridled love of food, or drink. Perhaps it is in the area of sexual pleasure, or maybe it is an addiction to alcohol or tobacco, or some other drug. Maybe you are lazy, and lie around when you should be working or exercising and keeping in shape. Where are you physically weak and what are you willing to do about it? If you do not deal with it, it will affect everything, including your spirit. Remember what Jesus said to his slumbering disciples: "Watch and pray that you not enter temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

2. Give your mind to the Lord.

This is a major element in distinguishing between mere legalism, the outward veneer of religious behavior, and a dynamic relationship with the living God. Paul describes the difference by contrasting conformity to the world with the inner transformation of our minds by the renewing power of God's Spirit. The word he uses is metamorphosis, by which something becomes something different than it was before, as when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. The Lord does not improve our minds: he makes them new! Paul describes three consequences of this transformation of the mind:

First, we begin to understand what God desires of us. If we want to know God's good and perfect will, then we need the renewed mind that God's Spirit gives his people. But we must feed this mind so that it can grow in wisdom rather than suffering atrophy. We renew the mind through the means of grace: God's Word, study, meditation and prayer, and resting in God's presence. We grow through public worship and receiving the sacrament faithfully. We grow through ministry and service, as we love one another in deed as well as in word.

Secondly, we begin to recognize our limitations. Paul tells us that as our minds are renewed, we must not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. The gospel leads not to arrogance, but to humility. We realize how much we need one another if we are to grow in grace. We are individually *members* of Christ's Body, in need of the other members in order to experience the full life of Christ. This realistic humility draws us together in a community of appreciation.

But *thirdly*, we also begin to recognize our gifts and abilities. While no Christian has all the gifts, every Christian has certain gifts that are needed by others, so again we are drawn together within the Body of Christ. "Having gifts, let us use them," writes the apostle, which leads to our final point.

3. Give your heart to the Lord.

The mercy that has reached out and saved us must begin to be demonstrated toward others through a love that is not faked, but is marked by authenticity. The word Paul uses is un-hypocritical, a word that describes an actor in a Greek drama leaving the stage and taking off his mask. The call to love includes not only those people, things or ideas that we find comfortable, but also a love of truth, and of all people, even of those who seek to be our enemies. God gives us a new heart – a heart transplant! – so that we can begin to love as Christ has loved us.

Are you willing to engage more deeply with the Body of Christ, perhaps by beginning to meet in small groups to pray for and encourage one another? Will you seek some area of service that matches your gifts and passion, and begin exploring how you might honor the Lord, enrich your life and the lives of others by giving yourself in love?

Conclusion

What will you do? God has shown us such great mercy. If you want life to begin again, give him your body, your mind and your heart. He will give you back to yourself cleaned up and empowered to be and do what you have longed for all your life, someone who at last is learning how to love – heart, mind and strength.

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