

Living Sacrifices

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Sermon prepared for **28 August 2005**,
first sermon everⁱ.

Reading: **Romans 12:1**
(13 minutes)

Theme: *"Our response to God's mercy
is total life-long commitment and service"*

Introduction

Once upon a time, a chicken and a pig were walking down the street. They noticed some poor kids who looked as if they hadn't eaten anything for days.

Moved with compassion, the chicken said to the pig, "I have an idea! Let's give those children a nice breakfast of bacon and eggs."

The pig considered the chicken's suggestion then replied, "Well, for you, that would involve a small sacrifice; but for me, it would involve total commitment!"

Our New Testament and Gospel readings both emphasise commitment – the total commitment that God requires from us. In our Matthew reading, Christ tells his followers, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" ⁱⁱ. And in our Romans reading, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that they must "offer their bodies as living sacrifices" ⁱⁱⁱ. According to these passages, God will be satisfied with nothing less than a total commitment of our entire selves.

This morning, I'd like us to focus on the first verse of our Romans reading. When you arrived this morning, you will have received a green card, with Romans 12:1 printed on one side. Please place this card on the ledge in front of you, so that you can refer to it during our discussion.

Romans is a dense book, filled with detailed and complex theological truths, divided into two main arguments. The first eleven chapters focus on doctrine, particularly on the doctrine of salvation. The last five chapters focus on practical application, on Christian living. And Romans 12:1 is the pivot verse between these two sections. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship."

In the first half of this verse, Paul refers back to the entire argument he has made in the previous eleven chapters – "Therefore, in view of God's mercy" means that everything he has said so far concerns God's mercy. And in the second half of the verse, Paul indicates what our response should be to God's mercy – "offer your bodies as living sacrifices".

So let us unpack these two thoughts – What does Paul mean by "God's mercy", and what does he mean when he says we should be "living sacrifices"?

God's Mercy

The word 'mercy' refers to the compassion that God shows us, specifically his saving acts and his plan of salvation. We need God's mercy because we are guilty and sinful. This is a key theme of Romans. Paul opens his letter to the church at Rome saying, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" ^{iv}. He talks at length about the universal guilt of humanity – Gentiles and Jews, each no better than the other. And he climaxes with the damning words, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" ^v.

Paul does not stand in judgment only of *others*, however. He stands in judgment on *himself* also. In chapter 7 he says, "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" ^{vi}. So we all – Paul, the early church in Rome, me and you – we all stand guilty before God.

So the question is, how do we get right with God? If our sinfulness is so universal and so bad, how can any of us have a relationship with him? If God is perfect and pure, and we are imperfect and fallen, how can we get close to God?

Well, in the Old Testament, the solution was through blood sacrifice or sin offerings. By offering a sacrifice to God, we could receive forgiveness for our recent sinfulness and experience God's mercy ^{vii}.

But these sacrifices were deeply flawed and inadequate. In the first place, the animals that were sacrificed were imperfect and limited. They were creatures of God, and therefore did not genuinely or fully cleanse people from their sin ^{viii}. And secondly, our motives for making the sacrifices became contaminated. The sacrifices became a ritual, rather than a genuine sacrifice of the heart. So we read in Psalm 51, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" ^{ix}. God has become tired of sacrifices that are offered in a meaningless or ritualistic way.

Ultimately, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament collapsed – both culturally and spiritually. And humanity was trapped in a position of being under God's judgement.

But then, God sent his son Jesus into the world, and Jesus became the perfect sacrifice ^x, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world ^{xi}. In contrast to the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament, Jesus was perfect, unblemished, without sin. And his motives were pure. Jesus' sacrifice met God's demands of justice and righteousness, and so he was able to pay for the sins of the entire human race – past, present and future – in one act at one point in history. Hebrews 10:10 says, "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

For you and me, this means that all the sins we have committed in the past, and all the sins we will still commit during the rest of our life, have already been paid for and sealed. All we have to do is receive God's forgiveness.

Just think for a moment about yourself – your own life, the things you have done wrong, the ways you have let God down, your fragile faith, the things you should have done but didn't. And now consider that God, through his Son, has already forgiven you for all of these things – not by anything that you have done or could do, but by *his own mercy*, freely given.

So this is what Paul is talking about when he says, "Therefore, in view of God's mercy". He is saying that God has paid the ultimate price for our own sinfulness, by allowing his son, Jesus Christ to be the perfect sacrifice, and in so doing, enabling us to enter into a relationship with him.

Living Sacrifices

Paul then is saying that in response to this mercy that God has shown to us, by making Jesus a *sacrifice for us*, we should offer ourselves as a *sacrifice to him*. Our sacrifice of ourselves, therefore, is not a way to purchase forgiveness – No! Firstly, this is an Old Testament purpose of sacrifice and has fallen away in the New Testament. And secondly, Christ has already served as a final sacrifice, and we can add nothing to it. So our sacrifice of ourselves is a *response* to God's mercy, an expression of our own *gratitude* and joy – it is a thanks offering ^{xii}, not a sin offering.

And God wants us to sacrifice ourselves completely, like the pig in our fable. He is *not* asking for our involvement. He is not asking for our best livestock. Or our money. Or our time. He is asking for our *everything* – our very life, our soul, our heart and mind.

Paul describes the quality of this sacrifice with three adjectives: our sacrifice must be living, holy and pleasing to God. What do these mean?

A Living Sacrifice. A “living sacrifice” is in stark contrast to the Old Testament sacrifices that were dead – or at least, the sacrifices died in the process! Christ himself died in the process of his sacrifice. So our sacrifice is unique in that it is *living*. And this implies that our sacrifice is a life-long process, rather than a single act at a point in time. Paul is therefore not saying that we should offer ourselves to God today and then carry on with our lives tomorrow. Rather, he is saying that our entire life – from rebirth to death – should be an act of sacrifice – all we are, all we have, all we can do.

But I think that Paul is also implying something else here. He typically uses the word ‘life’^{xiii} to refer to the result of Christ’s resurrection from the dead^{xiv}, the power of divine life over death^{xv}. “Life means Christ’s everlasting life, life from the dead and beyond the grave”^{xvi}. And so, in a spiritual sense, when we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, we share in Christ’s sacrifice of himself for us – we die to ourselves, and are resurrected into new life^{xvii}.

This is at least in part what Christ is saying in our Gospel reading today: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it”^{xviii}.

A Holy Sacrifice. In addition to being a living sacrifice, Paul also says we are to be a “holy sacrifice”. Now the word ‘holy’ has several different meanings in scriptures. In the Old Testament especially, it meant set apart or elect. So Paul may be meaning that we are to set apart our lives for God, which is really an extension of the idea of total commitment. In the New Testament, however, ‘holy’ is usually associated with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, being led by the Spirit, walking in step with the Spirit. And I suspect that this is what Paul is saying to us here.

We can only be holy – we can only be led by the Spirit of God – if we are in relationship with God. Our sacrifice is therefore only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is perhaps less about saying “Lord, I’m going to try really hard live for you this week” and more about saying “Father, I surrender myself to you, through the power of your Spirit”.

Pleasing to God. And finally, Paul says that our sacrifice must be “pleasing to God”. And very simply, this means that we need to devote ourselves to figuring out what God really wants, what makes him happy, what pleases him. And it is these things that we should be doing. Part of being an acceptable sacrifice to God is continually asking ourselves, “Would God be pleased by my actions, by my thoughts, by my words?” And if the answer is ‘no’, we should avoid doing these things. Our focus is on pleasing God, not pleasing ourselves or pleasing others.

Application

Well, this was a real mouthful! Let’s try to summarise what we’ve read in this one verse and then look at what it all means for us today and tomorrow. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship.”

We see that Paul is making an argument firstly for what God has done for us and secondly for what we should do in response.

In the first place, God has shown us unlimited mercy by sending his son, Jesus, to be the ultimate sacrifice, paying for our guilt and sin (past, present and future) so that we can enter into an eternal relationship with God.

And in the second place, in grateful response to God's mercy, Paul says that we should offer our lives, our entire selves, as a sacrifice back to God. And this sacrifice of our lives should be life-long, should be empowered by the Holy Spirit and should focus on pleasing God rather than ourselves or others.

Let me suggest, then, four practical things that we can do to live as a living sacrifice:

Firstly, if you are not in a personal relationship with God, or if you are not sure if you have a relationship with God, *sacrifice your life to him, today*. Accept him as your Lord and Saviour. Come to the rail at the end of this service, and there will be people available to guide you towards a relationship with Christ.

Secondly, *study God's Word*. Find out more about God's mercy; about our sinfulness and guilt, and about what God has done to bring us back into fellowship with him. It is only when we truly "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ"^{xix} that we will become willing to sacrifice ourselves to him in gratitude.

Third, *get involved in service*. Our service to God is worship. In the verses immediately following Romans 12:1, Paul talks about the body of Christ, and about the exercising of spiritual gifts in the body, and about how we should serve one another. A significant dimension of sacrifice, then, is service.

And finally, turn over the little green card that has Romans 12:1 printed on it. I'd like you to stick this card on your bathroom mirror, or next to your kitchen kettle, or on your treadmill. And every morning, as you prepare your body for the day, pray to God, "*Father, how can I please you today?*" Make this a mantra for your life – seeking to please God our father, in grateful response to the immense mercy that he has shown to us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his only son.

Amen.

References

ⁱ This was the first sermon I ever preached. I was very nervous for the first service – more relaxed for the second. I pretty much read the script, though knew it well enough to recite sections without reference to the text. It was very well received. I felt elated – the pulpit (actually a lecturn) was exactly where I felt I belonged; and preaching God’s Word to God’s People was such a privilege and honour.

ⁱⁱ Mt 16:24

ⁱⁱⁱ Ro 12:1

^{iv} Ro 1:18

^v Ro 3:23

^{vi} Ro 7:14-15

^{vii} Lev 4:35

^{viii} He 10:4

^{ix} Ps 51:17

^x 1Co 5:7

^{xi} Jn 1:29

^{xii} Ps 56

^{xiii} zwSan

^{xiv} Ro 6:10

^{xv} Ro 14:9

^{xvi} Brown, C. New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology.

^{xvii} Ro 6:1-14

^{xviii} Mt 16:24-25

^{xix} Eph 3:18