

Is Your All on the Altar?

Romans 12:1

1 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. (NKJV)

Let me read this verse again from the NASB:

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (NASB)

A cartoon (by Ed Fisher, source unknown) pictured a huge altar, with many steps leading to the top, such as you see in the ruins of the ancient Mayan culture in Central America. At the top a priest holds a sword, ready to slaughter the next victim. Two guards are dragging a very resistant young man up the stairs to be the next sacrifice. Watching the young man resist, a man who looks like the chief comments to the man standing next to him, "The young people don't seem to believe in anything these days!"

What does it mean to be a living sacrifice? What does this have to do with worship?

Last week we described worship as being lost in wonder, love and praise as we contemplated the awesome majesty of God. Paul demonstrated this kind of worship at the end of Romans 11. Today I want us to grow even deeper in our understanding of worship. In our text today Paul is urging us to present ourselves to God as an act of spiritual worship. Worship is more than what we do here on Sunday morning. Worship

Our text for today is verse one, it goes together with verse 2 which we will study next time. Romans 12:1-2 is the transition to the last major section of Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul has laid the doctrinal foundation for the Christian life in the first 11 chapters. Now in chapters 12-15 Paul will spell out some of the ways our faith and doctrine should be demonstrated in our daily lives. These transitional verses introduce us to the attitudes and actions which should characterize the Christian life, a lifestyle of worship.

This verse is so foundational and practical I want to focus on it phrase by phrase. This will teach us some elements of a lifestyle of worship.

1. Worship is a response to doctrine. "... therefore, ..." Your behavior flows from your belief. Whenever you see the word "therefore" in the Bible you should always ask what it's there for. What Paul teaches us about Christian living in chapters 12-16 has its foundation in the Christian doctrine of chapters 1-11. We spent 18 months digging into the first eleven chapters of Romans. When we come to chapter 12 of Romans, Paul is making a shift from doctrine to duty, from creed to conduct, from principles to practice, from the indicative to the imperative and from beliefs to behavior.

Paul follows a similar pattern in the books of Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians. He explains doctrine in the first part of the letter and then moves to application in the second half. Christian theology is never meant to be cold and lifeless. It must always have a practical application. The word "therefore" is saying, "Based on everything that I've just said, this is what you now need to put into practice."

Trying to worship God or live the Christian life without understanding the truth of the gospel would be like building a house without a foundation. A solid foundation may not be exciting to look at, but without it your house will not stand for long.

On the other hand, to spend all of your time on the foundation and never to build the house would be useless. The whole point of laying the foundation is to build a useful house to live in. In other words, sound doctrine must always be the basis for godly living.

2. Worship is answering God's urgent appeal. "I beseech you ..., brethren..."

Based on all that God has done, Paul says, **"I beseech you ..., brethren..."** This word "beseech" means "to call to one's side" in order to persuade someone to do something. The noun form is used of the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside to give us help. The Amplified Bible puts it this way: *"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, and beg of you..."* Even though Paul could have used a command here, he instead makes an appeal from love, not law. He does a similar thing in Ephesians 4:1: **"I, ... beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called."**

Notice that he refers to them as **"brethren,"** *"brothers,"* indicating his affection for them as members of God's family. This is a term of warmth that literally means from "one womb." He's begging brothers and sisters, not unbelievers, to live out their faith. It's a decision each believer must make for himself or herself. Will you answer God's urgent appeal?

3. Worship is motivated by God's mercy. "by the mercies of God."

Your motive for giving yourself totally to God is crucial. Some may dedicate themselves to God to try to work off their guilt. Many people get this wrong. They think they have to sacrifice or perform to get God's mercy. That is completely backwards. If we have learned anything from our study of Romans it is this: God graciously gives His mercies apart from anything we do. In fact, God only shows mercy to sinners—they are the only ones who need mercy.

Remember just a few verses back, (Romans 11:32 NKJV) **"For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all."**

Paul teaches this as well in his letter to Titus, (Titus 3:5 NKJV) **"not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit."**

God's mercies should cause us to surrender everything we are and sacrifice everything we have. One pastor hit this right on when he said: "Indeed, the extent to which we do not offer ourselves to God reflects the extent to which we do not understand the depth and significance of God's mercy." Most of us know that we've been forgiven, but many of us overestimate our goodness while underestimating the amount of mercy we have received.

The sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet knew the meaning of mercy. In Luke 7, Jesus was at a dinner party at the home a Pharisee named Simon. An uninvited woman who was a notorious sinner came to Jesus at the table, **"and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil."** Simon, the Pharisee, was indignant and mumbled about Jesus to himself, **"This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner."** Jesus answered by telling a parable, **"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?"** Simon answers correctly, **"I suppose the one whom he forgave more."** Jesus then looked at the woman and said to Simon, **"Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her**

tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little."

Worship is motivated by God's mercy.

Pastor Mark Batterson says that the prerequisite to worship is mercy: "And the prerequisite to mercy is doing something wrong. So if you've done something wrong you qualify for mercy. And if you qualify for mercy you qualify for worship...don't let what's wrong with you keep you from worshipping what's right with God."

4. Worship is offering yourself on God's altar. "that you present your bodies a living sacrifice."

This word "present" is a technical term that was used to describe the bringing and offering of an animal for sacrifice on an altar. It means "to decisively present" by placing the offering in the hands of another and relinquishing your grip. In the Old Testament a live animal was brought to the priest and the owner would lay hands on the beast to symbolically say, "This animal takes my place." The animal was then killed and the blood was sprinkled upon the altar. God isn't interested in beasts today; He's looking for bodies of believers who will be sold out to Him.

The Amplified Bible adds color with this paraphrase: "...Make a decisive dedication of your bodies..." This dedication should be both a duty and a delight because worship is a verb. Adoration must lead to action.

What are we to offer? "**Your bodies**" Paul may be using bodies to refer to the total person, but he probably wants us to think specifically about our physical bodies. In verse 2, he zeroes in on the mind, and so his emphasis on the body in verse 1 is probably deliberate.

Your body matters to God! Your salvation is being worked out, not just in your soul or your spirit, but also in your physical body. Have you ever thought of it this way? God has no lips except your lips yielded to him. He has no eyes except your eyes yielded to him. He has no ears except your ears yielded to him. He has no hands except your hands yielded to him. He has no feet except your feet offered to him.

We are to offer our bodies unreservedly to the Lord for his service, to be used for his glory.

Then our feet will walk in his paths, our lips will speak the truth and spread the gospel, our tongues will bring healing, our hands will lift up those who have fallen, and perform many mundane tasks as well like cooking and cleaning, typing and mending, our arms will embrace the lonely and the unloved, our ears will listen to the cries of the distressed, and our eyes will look humbly and patiently towards God (John Stott, Romans, p. 322).

Once a sacrifice is offered to God, you can't take it back. When we are called to present our "bodies" to the Lord, we are exhorted to offer our total being to Him, not just bits and pieces. 1 Corinthians 6:20: "**For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.**" God does not just want to be a "part" of our lives; He wants us to be completely His. Romans 6:13 tells us to offer every part of our bodies to Him as instruments of righteousness "**And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.**"

Maybe you've heard the story of the pig and the chicken walking down the road together when they come upon a sign advertising a breakfast to benefit the poor. The chicken said to the pig: "We should donate to that worthy cause. How about if I give an egg and you provide the ham?" To which the pig replied, "Not so fast. For you that would be a contribution, but for me it would be a total commitment." Too many of us have made some contributions but we resist total commitment.

The first mention of the word "worship" in the Bible occurs in the context of offering a sacrifice. In Genesis 22:5 as Abraham and his son Isaac made their way to the mountain where God had asked him to make the ultimate sacrifice of his beloved son Abraham said to his servants: **"the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."** Right from the very beginning, worship is connected with obedience to God and the offering of a life to Him.

This sacrifice is *living*. Animal sacrifices were killed and consumed once and for all. The sacrifice of our bodies is ongoing and repeated. God has given us new life through the new birth. We now gladly offer it back to Him.

The "worship" of the heathen very much involved the body. Immorality was often part of the heathen worship ritual. Christian worship involves the body too but in exactly the opposite way. The body was not to be employed for self-gratification but in self-sacrifice. The heathen's worship was pagan and unholy. The sacrifice of the Christian was to be **"holy" and "acceptable to God."**

God is delighted when His people are fully devoted to Him. Having said that, as we've learned in Romans, we are already pleasing to God since Jesus died in our place. We have been declared righteous and holy because the holiness of the Son has been credited to our account.

Brothers and sisters, the question is not, *"Did I like the music today and did the service please me?"* The real question is this: *"Is my worship, both here and outside this room, pleasing to God?"* Our purpose is always to please God, not to please ourselves.

5. Worship is service. "which is your reasonable service."

Live a lifestyle of "service worship." We're so accustomed to equating worship with what happens in this room on Sunday mornings. We call this our "worship service" and we should be worshipping God together. But worship must be more than what we do for an hour or so here on Sunday morning. There are 168 hours in a week. Does God want you to give Him just 1/168th of yourself? That is less than 2%. Is that what we mean when we sing "I surrender all"? "I surrender 2%"?

Louie Giglio writes: *"Most of my life, I thought that you went to church to worship. But now I see that the better approach is to go worshipping to church"* (page 115). While our time together on Sundays is extremely important, I want to suggest that God is less concerned with how this service goes and more concerned with how our service of worship goes outside these walls. This then is our "spiritual act of worship." The phrase "spiritual act of worship" or "service of worship" was familiar to those who understood the Old Testament sacrificial system. The word "service" refers to any ministry that priests and Levites did. Check this out. As believer-priests, when we offer our bodies we are involved in the sacred service of worship.

We actually get our word "liturgy" from the word "service" or "worship" in this passage. True worship is the presenting of our bodies as living sacrifices to Him and living holy and pleasing lives, every day of the week. We gather together to worship God on Sundays and then scatter the rest of the week to worship Him wherever He has placed us. We could call this "everywhere worship" or worship as a way of life.

I won't take the time to point this out but I do want to give you an assignment to read the rest of Romans 12 this week because after the challenge to not be conformed but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in verse 2, the rest of the chapter defines worship as service.

God's Altar Call

We want to close today with what I'm calling "God's Altar Call." That's really what Romans 12:1 is all about. It's a personal time for us to present our bodies as sacrifices to God. This verse literally says, "You, all of you, present yourselves to God." This is what God wants from everyone. The Message reads this way: *"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering."*

It's not an offering for your sin or to make you acceptable to God. Jesus has already done that. He offered up Himself, once for all, the holy spotless Lamb of God, as the sacrifice for our sin. By faith in Him, in His sacrificial death, and life-giving resurrection, we have been given the righteousness of God. We are accepted in Christ. God offered the greatest sacrifice that could ever be offered, His only beloved Son. Christ offered Himself on the cross to forever take away our sin and make us right with God.

The song group, Mercy Me, sings a song called "God With Us" and the bridge in that song says, "Such a tiny offering, compared to Calvary, nevertheless we lay it at your feet."

Nothing we give to God could ever compare to the sacrifice that Jesus made for us at the cross. Nevertheless, we offer our bodies as living sacrifices at the feet of Jesus. It is the most reasonable, logical, rational thing to do.

As we close today and move to our invitation time and into celebrating the Lord's Supper, let me just ask you in the words of the hymn by Elisha Hoffman,

*Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?
Your heart does the Spirit control?
You can only be blest, and have peace and sweet rest
As you yield Him your body and soul.*