

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 1 of 13)

Living Sacrifices: How the Gospel Really Works

Romans 12:1-2

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¹ 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. ² Do 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 (ESV)

“What I’m about to share with you will be very interesting, but it doesn’t actually work. I’m going to show you some amazing ideas from the Bible, but when you leave today you will not be able to apply anything that you hear.”

Imagine if that were the true introduction to my message. How would it impact your level of interest and the way you listened? I would imagine that most of us would immediately tune out because we are not interested in hearing a message about something that does not actually work. You did not come to church today, regardless of whether or not you are a Christian, to hear a sermon that has no effect on your life. Who wants to listen to a pastor talk about interesting ideas out of the Bible that have no tangible results? No one.

The best sermons and the best Sundays are when you see the connection between a truth in the Bible and where you live and then when you see your life change because of the application of that truth. There is nothing more glorious or hopeful than to see transformation by means of a biblical truth. It is amazing to see theology work in a person’s life or to see it work in the life of a group of people who call themselves a church.

Overview of Romans 12-16

Today we turn an important corner in our study of the book of Romans. Paul’s pattern in most of his pastoral letters is to begin with theology and then apply it to very specific areas of life. This pattern of theology-to-practice is not only a helpful way to understand the book of Romans, but it is also helpful as we study the Bible as a whole. From this Sunday to the end of the year, we’ll be looking at some very practical passages. Over thirteen Sundays, we are going to see the way that Romans 1-11 actually works in the life of the believer.

That is why this final section is entitled The Practice of Righteousness. After looking at the Revealing of Righteousness (Rom. 1-2), the Gift of Righteousness (Rom. 3-4), the Hope of Righteousness (Rom. 5-7), the Promise of Righteousness (Rom. 8), and the Mystery of Righteousness (Rom. 9-11), we now come to how all of this actually works.

What we are going to discover is how the beautiful theology of Romans applies to differing spiritual gifts, godly relationships inside the church, godly response to persecutors, how to live as a good citizen and think about the government, what Christian morality looks like, how to avoid being judgmental, how to handle “gray-areas” among believers when they disagree, and how to live in harmony despite racial and preferential differences.

Do those things interest you? Are they relevant to the culture in which we live today? Do they apply to us as a church? I find it fascinating that even though the book of Romans was written sometime in the first century, the truth and the applicability of it is as important today as was when Paul wrote to the church in Rome.

A New Mindset

Today our text is only the first two verses of Romans 12. Typically we study a larger text, but I wanted to spend the entire day on these verses because they are both an introduction to chapters 12-16 and a paradigm or mindset as to what it means to be a Christian.

These verses introduce us to a very important transition that has to happen when you read the Bible, listen to a sermon, or study a theological topic. The transition is the connection between theology and ethics. Or, to say it another way, to connect the truth about God to how I live. Christianity is not merely a philosophical idea or a belief system. It is truth to be lived. Theology creates morality. And this is so important that the apostle says in Galatians that if your Christianity does not “work” morally, then you do not really have true Christianity (see Galatians 5:16-24). Verses 1-2 introduce us to this idea.

Additionally, these verses lay before us a Christian mindset or posture as it relates to how we really live. For you to be a Christian, it must actually work. But it works by means of a paradigm or a mindset that is very clear and very important in these verses, especially when the culture around Christianity becomes increasingly hostile.

A few months ago I described the Christian life like walking up a down escalator. Romans 12:1-2 gives us the kind of mindset that a believer should have when struggling to walk against the downward pull. But this mindset becomes even more critical when the pace of the escalator feels more like a 6 mph treadmill or when you’re walking upstream in a river only to find the water getting deeper and the current faster.

So let me give you three simple phrases that I hope will stay with you. They reflect a mindset that is fundamental to the Christian life: “I’m Yours,” “Change me,” and “Lead Me.”

“I’m Yours”

The first statement reflects a mentality that comes out of verse one. It reflects an important combination of a believer’s spiritual position in Christ and a personal acknowledgment of that reality. To say, “I’m Yours” is to recognize and affirm something very significant and very practical. And without getting this mindset right, the other statements have no meaning or effect. This is the fountainhead of practical Christianity.

Verse 1 begins with a clear and authoritative appeal from the apostle Paul. This is more than a suggestion. The tone that is expressed here has depth and meaning to it. The appeal that follows is central to what Paul has said to them and us over the last eleven chapters. Remember where we left Romans last time? *“From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.”* (Rom. 11:36). Paul’s appeal is based upon and is an implication of the beautiful theological realities of the previous chapters. It would be hard to overestimate the strength of what Paul is saying here. If you loved Romans 1-11, then lean in and listen to what is going to follow.

The connection to the previous chapters is made apparent by the word “therefore” and the phrase “by the mercies of God.” The word “therefore” clearly indicates that what Paul says is an implication of the previous chapters. And the phrase “by the mercies of God” grounds Paul’s appeal in the kindness, grace, and mercy of God from the previous chapters.

Over and over through Romans 1-11, we have seen the beauty of God’s mercy. Against the dark backdrop of our sinfulness, we have seen the stunning radiance of a righteousness that a sovereign God gives to those who are “in Christ.” We’ve been to the summit, and we’ve heard *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 8:1). And in light of God’s undeserved and sovereign mercy, there is a way to live. People who have seen this vision of mercy are different.

This is why theology and big thoughts about God really matter. This is why you should read a theologically-oriented book this summer and why you should listen carefully on Sundays. This is why you should thank God for Sunday School teachers who teach your children in a God-centered way. And why some of you should consider volunteering to serve in Next Generations. A big view of a merciful God is the starting point of the Christian life.

The starting point of “I’m Yours” is first and foremost something that God has done to us. It was His mercy and His calling and His kindness and His sacrifice that made our salvation possible. There is no forgiveness, no atonement, and no eternal life apart from His mercy. “I’m Yours” means that you belong to God because of God!

But there is something more here – something that takes the beautiful positional reality and embraces it, reaffirms it, and celebrates it. No one says, “I’m Yours,” without God working first in his heart, but Paul intends for something more to happen here. Paul intends for believers to live out their “in Christ” position in the real world. He is calling believers to connect the dots between a theological vision of a righteousness that God gives and a righteousness that works.

Believers are called to present themselves as living sacrifices. This is a very interesting and powerful statement because Paul is drawing from a familiar worship metaphor connected to the Old Testament sacrificial system. The design of the temple mount and the activity of the various festivals all featured sacrifices. The offering of sacrifices was central to Israel’s relationship with God and to their obedience to Him. To belong to God as the people of God meant offering sacrifices to God.

So when Paul says “present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” he is pulling from that worship culture, but with a very important change. Instead of bringing a dead animal, the Christian’s new sacrifice is to present all of himself or herself to God. Three words are important to know here:

- **Present** – this is a command that is grammatically rooted in what God has done. That is why I've chosen the statement "I'm Yours." In light of what God has done, the believer is to have a "presenting" mindset. As John Calvin said, "I offer my heart to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely."
- **Bodies** – Paul uses this term to capture the entire person. The physical body is certainly in view here, but it is more all-encompassing than just physical obedience. The offering is complete and total. You offer all of you. "I'm Yours" means that you affirm that you belong to Christ.
- **Living sacrifices** – This is more than just being physically alive. In context of the book of Romans, it means spiritually alive. The theological realities of Romans 1-11 have created spiritual life!

There is a direct connection between being "in Christ" and how to live "in the world." Theology creates ethics. The fact that you belong to Christ means something very practical. Here is how Paul stated this truth in Romans 6.

¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. Romans 6:11–14 (ESV)

To be a Christian and to belong to Christ means something practical and significant. That is why verse one ends the way it does: "as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1b). What does God want from His children? What is holy and acceptable to Him? Answer: living sacrifices — a life lived in the banner of the grace of God is the purpose of His mercy.

Finally, the phrase "spiritual worship" has a variety of English translations: KJV – "reasonable service"; NIV – "true and proper worship"; NLT- "truly the way to worship him." The meaning of the phrase is connected to something that is reasonable or fits. In other words, it is to say to God "I'm Yours" in such a way that it affects how you live makes sense in light of God's mercy.

Putting all of this together, Romans 12:1 shows us the first step in what it means to apply the theology of Romans 1-11. In light of what Paul has previously showed us, a follower of Jesus should continually affirm his or her position in Christ by connecting position to practice. To say, "I'm Yours" is more than just a statement about a spiritual position; it is to affirm one's allegiance to a particular way of living.

Perhaps an illustration will help cement this in your mind. To be "married" is both a positional reality and a practical reality. The status of "married" carries with a code of conduct that is central to the definition of the relationship between a man and a woman. The conduct and the position are linked -- so much so that if a temptation for immorality presents itself, the married spouse would be wise to declare both internally and to the tempter: "I'm married." And that statement is not just about a date in the past. It is a position with ethical and reasonable commitments.

To affirm "I'm Yours" means that God has graced us with His mercy, that we belong to Him, and that every part of me belongs to Him. It is the first step in embracing a Christian mindset.

"Change Me"

The second mindset that is central to being a follower of Jesus is a desire for spiritual change. To be a living sacrifice is not static. It is to embrace a continual process of transformation which was begun by God and which continues by various means of grace.

Verse two begins with an important warning: *“Do not be conformed to this world.”* It is telling that Paul starts here, and I think we all know why. Living sacrifices are not placed in a safe environment. The culture of the world is marked by hostility, contrary forces, and continual anti-righteousness pressure. The Bible helps us to see something really critical: the world and its culture are not neutral.

This is helpful for two reasons. First, it wakes us up to the fact that the culture around us, while embedded with aspects of God’s goodness, has the potential to shape us and conform us in ways that are dangerous. Some of you may have grown up in churches where “worldliness” was a frequent topic, perhaps so much so, or because of a focus on a “No-no” list, that you internally roll your eyes when you hear talk about the world. But this text reminds us that bad solutions from your past do not negate the real danger of worldly thinking. There is a worldview wind that is blowing, a competing theology as it relates to who God is, who you are, knowing what is right and what is wrong, and what determines how we should live. The world is not neutral. Movies, social media, books, friends, education systems, business culture, your neighbors, government, and consumerism are not neutral. They are platforms through which the theology and ethics of broken human beings are leveraged for influence. The world, the flesh, and the devil are always colluding to conform us into an anti-God mindset.

Second, this warning calls us to not be passive. To sit back and thoughtlessly ingest every aspect of the world’s culture will end up shaping how we think. In small and subtle ways, the world’s theology and ethics become embedded in what we love, what we enjoy, what we value, and what we believe. And it isn’t long until those thoughts become actions. So being conformed to the world means that you have taken on the shape of the world. You and the world fit nicely together in your thinking and in your actions. And that is a huge problem because the world is broken and has an anti-God mentality.

So what is the solution? There is a very important “but” in verse two. Believers are not to be conformed, **but** instead are to be transformed. In the midst of hostile culture, there are to be those who are living sacrifices, and they are constantly embracing spiritual change.

To be transformed means that there is a metamorphosis that is taking place in the life of the believer. It means that believers are being incrementally conformed, not to the world, but to the image of Jesus Christ, and that the longer we live, the more we emulate the glory of who He is. Here is how 2 Corinthians 3:18 says it:

¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV)

This text parallels Romans 12 very well in that it shows us not only the priority of transformation but also the means. In 2 Corinthians it sounds like, “beholding the glory of the Lord.” And in Romans 12 it sounds like “by the renewing of your mind.” The idea is simply that you become what you behold. Or that you are what you think.

The paradigm for Christian living requires a very intentional commitment to the life of the mind. Thinking creates actions. Mindsets produce lifestyles. Theology creates ethics. Therefore, believers must pay careful attention to their thinking.

The Bible is filled with instructions about the mind. Let me give you a few examples:

- Jesus' summary of the essence of obedience was *"love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"* (Matthew 22:37).
- In rebuking Peter, Jesus said, *"Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man"* (Matthew 16:23).
- Christians are exhorted to have the *"the mind of Christ"* which involves humility, unity and sacrifice (Phil. 2:3-6).
- Believers are told in Colossians 3 to *"set their minds on things above, not on things that are on earth"* (Col. 3:1).
- The chief characteristic of the sinfulness of humanity is having a *"debased mind"* (Romans 1:28). It is part of the downward spiral stemming from a wrong view of God.

²¹ *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but **they became futile in their thinking**, and their foolish hearts were darkened...²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, **God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.*** (Romans 1:21, 28)

To renew the mind is to participate in the reversal of the tragedy of Romans 1. It is to have a mind that is rooted in right theology and in right actions. It is to have the Holy Spirit use the Word of God (Heb. 3:12) and the community of God (Heb. 3:12-13) in order to renew our thinking and transform it into thoughts that fit with the glory of Jesus Christ. It is the work of God's Spirit, through the Word of God, that transforms our minds from futile, debased, and ungodly thinking which leads to all manner of unrighteousness to a mind that has eternal significance, filled with purity and truth, and God-glorifying such that righteousness characterizes God's people.

This transformation is stunning and compelling. The picture here is of a people who are struggling in the midst of a hostile culture and broken humanity who have been rescued by Christ and who are internalizing His words such that His Spirit makes transforms them into miniature and imperfect versions of Him.

This is why you must read, meditate upon, pray over, and memorize the Bible. This is why you must labor to place the Word of God in front of your children, grandchildren, friends, and fellow church members. Without the Word and the Spirit, we will be caught in the current of the world. There is no middle ground; we are either being conformed to the world or are being transformed into the image of Christ. Therefore, we must cry out "Change Me!" And that leads us to the final aspect of a Christian mindset.

"Lead Me"

I love the fact that this text ends like this. It says, *"... that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"* (Rom. 12:2b). This paradigm acknowledges that there is a

real need to discern the will of God. It does not assume that the will of God is always clear. Why would Paul say that?

I think he makes this statement because he knows how difficult and complex living in a fallen world really is. You will see this very clearly when we get into the complicated problems associated with Romans 14-15. Paul knows that a great amount of wisdom is needed when living as a Christian in a world that is not only fallen but that is also always changing.

Our culture is never static. And I'm sure that you sense that as you watch what is happening to our present culture in the United States. The rate of change in regards to morality and ethics over the last ten years has been staggering.

I have found this to be very true as a dad of teenagers. It is nearly impossible to keep up with all the changes. I recently had to have them interpret someone's text message to me because I had no idea what "rofl . . . totes perf" meant. What's more, the amount of vehicles for temptations are stunning and complicated. We need great biblical wisdom to navigate a culture that is creative and cunning with its sinfulness.

So how do you know God's will? How do you know what is good, acceptable, and perfect? How do you test the things that are a part of the culture to see if they are what God would truly want? The answer is to pursue a Christian mindset. In order to know the will of God in the midst of a hostile culture, you need to have your mind shaped by the Word of God. You need to know the Word so you can live the Word so that you discern the will of God.

That's where some of you are really missing it. You may have tried to change and failed because there was no change of mindset, no brokenness, and no giving up on your way of thinking. The problem may be that you are still listening to yourself. And the effect is the same cycle of failure. Becoming a Christian means that you belong to God and you are so captivated by His grace that you love His thinking over your own.

Others of you are setting yourself up for huge failure in the future. I've seen it often as a pastor. Someone neglects to know the Word, to pray, or to be a part of the community of faith. They barely listen on a Sunday to the sermon, and then suddenly when a major decision is upon them, they want to know God's will. But the real reason is not because of God. No, the real reason is because they don't want to choose the wrong spouse, job, or home. The tragedy is that the chance of them knowing God's will is so slim because discerning God's will is a mindset. And you don't build mindsets quickly.

Let me encourage those of you who are trying to take seriously the intake of the Word of God into your heart or into the hearts of your children. Let's be honest. There are some times – more often than we'd care to admit – where we wonder, "Is this really doing anything?" You might wonder that when you have your kids worship with you and you wonder, "Is this really worth it?" What you need to know is that in very real ways the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, is building a mindset in you. He's using the Word and individual verses in the Bible to shape your vision of God, your view of the world and your view of yourself. Rest assured that the transformation is happening, and when some new issue or

unique temptation or challenging situation arises, you will be able to discern God's will in a way that would have been impossible before.

A mindset that begins with "I'm Yours" and cries out "Change Me" is able to test the things of the world and to discern God's will.

Do You Have a Christian Mindset?

Romans 12:1-2 serves as an introduction to a very practical section of Romans and a paradigm of what it means to have a Christian mindset. These verses show us the connection between theology, ethics, and the life of the mind. They warn us about the real possibility of being pressed into the mold of the world and give us hope of a different way of thinking and living.

In light of that, let me ask you a few questions:

- Have you placed your trust in Christ such that you belong to Him?
- Do you have a big view of God and a love for His Word?
- Have you become complacent or too cozy with "worldly thinking?"
- Do you see the value of the Word, the church, and the Holy Spirit in shaping your thinking?
- Do you recognize the danger of the culture around you and the kind of pressure it can apply?
- Do you see the hope and the power of a Christian mindset?

Christianity works! It changes who we are, how we think, and how we live. As a pastor, this is what I desperately want for you. As a father, this is what I want for my kids.

On Friday night we crossed a major milestone in our lives with the graduation of our twins, Hayden and Joseph. I remember my graduation, and I'm sure most of you do as well. It was the beginning of a new season of life. And as we celebrated that important moment in the life of our boys, do you know what I want for them?

I want them to give their entire being to the service of Jesus Christ. I want them to be living sacrifices that are holy and acceptable to God. I want them to not be conformed to this world. No! Oh, I want them, instead, to be transformed into the likeness of Christ by the renewing of their minds. I want to send them out into a dark, hostile world knowing that with a Christian mindset they will be able to know how to honor Christ and discern God's will. My prayer for them, my prayer for you, and my prayer for myself is the same: God give us a Christian mind. I'm Yours. Change Me. Lead Me.

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