

## “This Is Your Spiritual Act of Worship”

### Sermons on Romans # 30

*Texts: Romans 12:1-2; Psalm 50:1-23*

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In Romans 12 we come to the so-called “practical” section of the Book of Romans. At the end of his famous epistle, Paul now addresses some of the specific issues facing the Christians in Rome. But he does so only in the light of the many important theological themes he has developed in the first eleven chapters of this book. In fact, we can’t understand the so-called “practical section” of Romans properly if we don’t see this section as the direct application in daily life of those specific theological points Paul has already made, especially the fact that through faith in Jesus Christ, we have already been reckoned righteous before God.

Growing up in fundamentalism, I rarely recall hearing a sermon on the first eleven chapters of Romans, although we frequently heard sermons from chapters 12-15. And I suspect that there will be some of you reading this series who are glad to finally get to the useful stuff—the practical section of Romans. While there is much here that is very practical and quite beneficial for us in our daily lives, let us keep in mind that everything that Paul tells us in this section is the application of those doctrines he has set forth in the previous chapters. The reason why so many of us find Reformation theology so liberating is precisely because it puts practical Christian living in its proper perspective—the Christian life is the working out in our everyday lives the righteous status that God freely gives to all of those who by faith, trust in Jesus Christ, and not in their own good works.

One writer has identified the theme of this section of Romans—as “God’s righteousness in everyday life.”<sup>1</sup> Another points out that this section of Romans summarizes what “the Christian’s response to God’s grace should be.”<sup>2</sup> Paul’s understanding of the Christian life is clearly expressed in terms of living out our justification as we observed in Romans 6:11: “*In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*” In Romans 12-15, Paul will discuss how putting the flesh to death and rising to newness of life as mentioned in Romans 6, is made manifest in lives of those whom God has justified through faith alone. Recall that in Romans 7:6, Paul spoke of the Christian life as “life in the Spirit.” Well, in Romans 12-15, Paul describes what life in the Spirit looks like as it is worked out in daily life.

To put it another way, Christians will perform good works *not to* be justified, but because they *are* justified. In Romans 6, Paul has already expressed the fact that the same act of faith which justifies also unites us to Jesus Christ. We are buried with Jesus Christ in his death and raised with him to newness of life in baptism. Union with Christ, then, is the foundation for Paul’s doctrine of sanctification in which the old sinful *habitus* of the flesh (the habit of sin) is progressively weakened in the lives of those whom God has redeemed, while the new man is continually strengthened and renewed unto the image of Christ. The specific means through which God the Holy Spirit performs this on-going work of sanctification are word and sacrament (the means of grace) and secondarily, prayer and fellowship. Thus Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life is centered upon the objective means of grace (word and sacrament), and not upon subjective religious experience as is so popular in Evangelical, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox

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<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, Romans, p. 639.

<sup>2</sup> Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 748.

traditions. This is why the Reformed tradition stresses piety (demonstrable obedience to God's commandments) in connection to sanctification, not spirituality, contemplation nor mysticism all of which center on the self and personal religious experience.

The fact that this section of Romans builds upon Paul's prior discussion of human sinfulness (chapters 1-3), justification (chapters 4-5), sanctification (chapters 6-8), the role of Jew and Gentile in redemptive history (chapters 9-11) supports the Reformed distinctive of the Christian life as being understood in terms of guilt, grace and gratitude, such as that set forth as the organizational structure of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. Recall that Paul began with the universal human predicament, the entire human race being under God's curse, condemned by our inability to fulfil the righteous requirements of the law. Paul describes how in Jesus Christ, God has made provision for the forgiveness of our sins as well as providing a righteousness which does meet his covenantal demands for a perfect obedience (under the terms of the covenant of works and its restatement in the Sinaitic legislation). Paul sets forth how it is in Christ that we come to life, how the flesh is crucified both objectively in Christ and daily in our lives as Christians, how the Spirit indwells us so that we are no longer dominated by the flesh, nor are we slaves to sin, since the Spirit leads us in the way we should go.

It is not until Paul has clearly established these points in the mind of his hearers that he gives them specific commands as to how to behave under specific circumstances. It is only once we are clear about how it is that we are justified, that we can answer questions about how we relate to non-Christians, fellow Christian believers and civil authorities. How then are we to use and maintain our Christian liberty, keep genuine Christianity unity and support those who are weak in faith without causing them to stumble? In Romans 12:1-15:13, Paul will tell us. But make no mistake about it—the practical section of Romans necessarily follows the doctrinal section and cannot be understood without it.<sup>3</sup>

As we work our way through this section of Romans, we must be very clear about Paul's use of indicative and imperative moods. Indicatives are statements of fact—"God justifies the wicked." Imperatives are commands—"Reckon yourselves dead to sin, but alive unto God." A huge problem is created whenever we turn indicatives into imperatives. If we do, we inevitably confuse the law (what God commands of us) with the gospel (what God freely gives to us in Christ). But if we downplay or ignore the imperatives that Paul sets forth, we risk becoming libertines or antinomians (people who have no regard for the law of God or appropriate Christian behavior). This is why we must keep in mind that Paul has spent 11 chapters on setting forth the proper relationship between the law and the gospel, before setting out a series of imperatives beginning in Romans 12. Failure to be clear about this distinction between law and gospel leads to two of the most common errors associated with the Christian life: legalism (we must do good works to be justified) and antinomianism (the justified need not perform good works as the fruit of a justifying faith).

We must also be very careful here *not* to understand Paul to be saying, "we owe God obedience because of what he has done for us." Fear of punishment and hope of reward is not a proper motivation for the Christian life—this too is utterly self-centered. Rather, we should understand Paul to be saying, "because we are in Christ, the following is instruction on how to live lives of gratitude before for God, things which naturally flow out of our union with Christ." Yes, there is a definite sense of obligation here, seen in the increased use of the imperative mood. But, we must be very careful not to turn obligation into a begrudging obedience. Rather we must see this obligation in terms of a grateful expression of our union

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<sup>3</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 748.

with Christ. It is certainly not accidental that the glorious doxologies of Romans 8:32-38 and Romans 11:33-36, precede Paul's relatively brief discussion of Christian living. Only the heart which knows the joy of being reckoned righteous before God, will gladly obey the commandments of God.

As I have said on several occasions, we should not view Paul's so-called "practical" sections of his epistles like we would use a Chilton's *Auto Manual*, with its series of diagnostic questions and answers which enable someone to identify a particular problem, discover all of the possible reasons for the problem, and then follow the steps needed to remedy the situation. Paul does not give us recipes for successful Christian living as is characteristic of much of evangelicalism. Nor does he set out Canon Law (as in Romanism) with precise instructions for Christians to adjudicate questions about Christian living under every possible circumstance. Building upon the first eleven chapters, Paul instead speaks to specific situations facing the congregation in Rome, while at the same time laying down some general principles by which we as God's people are to live our lives before God.

This gives us tremendous freedom of conscience in the so-called "things indifferent" (*adiophora*), things which are neither specifically sanctioned or condemned in Scripture. But whenever we discuss these "things indifferent" (*adiophora*) some people get a bit nervous, because there are indeed many areas of our daily lives as Christians wherein God expects us to make correct choices without giving us a specific commands one way or the other. Hence, the tendency of legalists to speak where Scripture does not speak and the tendency of antinomians to take the absence of specific command as an excuse for doing whatever they please. Neither of these approaches is biblical, nor are they of any value in helping us navigate through the daily affairs of life. Life in the Spirit is a life of freedom not from the law, but a freedom to obey God's commands, something we could never do before we became Christians.

Therefore, it is vital to read Paul's instruction here in light of the overall theology of Romans 1-11. For obedience to such instruction is the visible manifestation of a life lived in faith. As Charles Cranfield points out, we are all slaves to something—either sin, the law and death, or a slave of the son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.<sup>4</sup> But since Jesus Christ has given himself for our sins, we simply cannot go on living in those sins any more. And that's the reason why the practical section follows the theological section and why, having considering the wonders of the gospel, our hearts are filled with gratitude to God and a desire to obey his commands. A heart filled with fear or self-interest is not particularly grateful. A begrudging obedience is not gratitude.

With this in mind, let us turn to our text, the first two verses of Romans 12.

These two verses serve as an introduction to this entire section (12:1-15:13) in which Paul discusses at length the Christian's attitude to God, to the unbeliever, to fellow believers, to the weaker brother, as well as to the state (civil authorities). Therefore, it is important that we understand these two verses correctly. We will devote our time this morning to doing exactly that. Writes Paul: "*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. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*"

As we have seen throughout our series on Romans, the conjunction ("therefore"—*οὖν*) indicates that

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<sup>4</sup> Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.593

Paul's following comments are based upon what has gone before, namely the lengthy treatment of the universal effects of sin, what God has done in Christ to provide for our justification, how the power of sin, the law and death have been broken through our union with Christ, and how Jews and Gentiles are to relate to one another in the messianic age. It is important to notice that "Paul is not writing an essay in abstract ethics, but telling the Romans what their conduct must be in light of what God has done."<sup>5</sup>

What follows is an apostolic exhortation, "*I urge you, brothers,*" which probably ought to be taken to mean that the following contains apostolic teaching which applies to the specific situations Paul is about to address. Paul's imperatives should always be seen as an expression of gratitude for what God has done for the sinner in Jesus Christ, not as means to become more righteous.<sup>6</sup> Since we are reckoned righteous through the perfect righteousness of Christ, how can we earn more righteousness by our own good works? Therefore, these are imperatives which this congregation is to heed because they believe the gospel, and which, in turn, become part of the general ethical teaching of the New Testament. We will find both specific application to the church in Rome, as well as general ethical principles set forth.

The apostle begins with the premise he has already set out in Romans 9-11, namely, that God's mercy is not only prior to his ethical instruction in terms of the structure of this letter, but God's mercy is the foundation for all Christian obedience. For Paul, Christian ethics flow from Christian doctrine. As John Calvin so aptly states, "Paul's entreaty teaches us that men will never worship God with a sincere heart, or be roused to fear and obey him with sufficient zeal, until they properly understand how much they are indebted to His mercy. The Papists count it enough if they exhort some kind of obedience by fear. Paul, however, in order to bind us to God not by servile fear but by a voluntary and cheerful love of righteousness, attracts us by the sweetness of the grace in which our salvation consists . . . . The heart must be harder than iron which is not kindled by the above-mentioned doctrine into a love for God, whose kindness towards itself it feels to be so profuse. Where then are those who think that all exhortations to an honorable life are taken away if we set men's salvation in the grace of God alone? A godly mind is not formed to obey God by precepts or sanctions so much as by a serious meditation upon the divine goodness towards itself."<sup>7</sup> Until we grasp that all of this comes from God's mercy, we will never make progress in the Christian life. We will only regress.

At this point it is important to note that only Christians truly obey God, for without faith it is impossible to please him (Hebrews 11:6). That only Christians truly obey God is because of the fact that only Christians have been justified by grace alone through faith alone. Only Christians have been buried with Christ and raised with Christ by virtue of their union with him. Only Christians walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh (Romans 8). As Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:10, Christians are created in "*Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" Thus God's grace and mercy have as their goal the recreation of the sinner unto the image of Christ so that the sinner might now actually do good works! And this is only because God has been merciful to us. But because God has been merciful to us, we are urged to do the following things, which begin with Paul's exhortation for us to "*offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.*"

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<sup>5</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 432.

<sup>6</sup> Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, II.595.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, p. 263.

Since we are some two thousand years removed from Paul's world, these words certainly do not strike us with the force they did Paul's original audience. Leon Morris points out something that is easy for us to miss: "First century people were familiar with the offering of sacrifices whereas we are not. They had stood by their altar and watched as an animal was identified as their own, as it was slain in the ritual manner, its blood manipulated, and the whole or part of the victim burned on the altar and ascended in the flames to the deity they worshiped. To suggest that they themselves should be sacrifices is a striking piece of imagery."<sup>8</sup> Because of Jesus Christ's saving work on our behalf, Christians do not offer bloody sacrifices on an altar as did the Jews. Christians now offer spiritual sacrifices to God. In fact, a number of Psalms, such as Psalm 50, our Old Testament lesson, do indeed speak of making sacrifices in a metaphorical sense such as Paul uses here.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Paul's use of the word "body" is noteworthy. Many take Paul to mean that our bodies are representative of ourselves, for example, our entire person or whole being. If we take Paul to mean such a thing, this would mean that we offer ourselves to Christ as living sacrifices by offering our bodies to him. Strictly speaking, there is nothing wrong with this interpretation, but we should not overlook the fact it is a common theme in Paul's writings that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), that they are instruments of righteousness (Romans 6:13) and that as justified sinners both our bodies and spirits are consecrated to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:14). Before our union with Christ, Paul could speak of the body of sin (Romans 6:6), but that after being buried and raised with Christ, sin no longer reigns in our mortal bodies (Romans 6:12). Therefore, because of God's mercy we have been transformed and now live in the Spirit, not in the flesh. Thus like the sacrificial animal whose body was given up to the "gods" so too, we are to offer our own bodies to God as "*living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.*" This, of course flies in the face of all gnostic or dualistic schemes which depreciate the body, or speak of the body as evil because it is sensual or material.

We must also be careful not to overlook the fact that this is a "living sacrifice," which is holy and pleasing to God. In the words of one writer, "living marks a difference from the general run of sacrifices. It is true that animal victims were living when they were brought to the altar (a dead animal could not be brought for sacrifice), but as offered they were dead. Paul can speak of believers dying to sin (Romans 6:2), but his emphasis is on the glorious life they now live with Christ (Romans 6:8); they are 'alive from the dead' (Romans 6:13). As offered they are alive. The sacrifice of which Paul writes demands not the destruction but the full energy of life. It is positive and constructive."<sup>10</sup> Thus we offer God a living sacrifice (our bodies) because in Christ, we have been made alive for this very purpose, to glorify God through them. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 6:20: "*you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*"

One more important point ought to be made as well. Such a living sacrifice is said to be "holy," which is most often understood in the sense of being "consecrated" (set apart), as through this living sacrifice the believer continually gives themselves over to God for his purposes. Such an act, Paul says, is pleasing to God and constitutes the very heart of Christian worship—which is that we offer ourselves to God. But Paul also connects this offering of our bodies to a "*spiritual act of worship,*" which has been described as

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<sup>8</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 433.

<sup>9</sup> Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 750.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 434.

an intentionally ambiguous phrase, creating an intentional rich complexity in the act, which is both reasonable (rational) and spiritual.<sup>11</sup> It is not clear exactly what Paul means by this, but it involves both mind and heart. In other words, our whole person, mind and heart, is to be involved in this spiritual act of humbling giving ourselves to God and to his service.

This means that the positive act of Christians offering ourselves as “living sacrifices,” stands in direct opposition to the prohibition mentioned in verse 2, which is that we are not to be “conformed” to “*the pattern of this world.*” Instead of being conformed to the pattern of this world, Paul instructs the Christian to be “*transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” This is a very significant point, and becomes the basis for what Paul will discuss later on in both this epistle and in others (cf. Ephesians 4:17-24), namely that the fall of the human race into sin darkens our understanding of spiritual things, while regeneration begins the process of restoration. It is not as though Christians are smarter than non-Christians. The issue is that non-Christians are intellectually prejudiced against Christ and the gospel. Rather, non-Christians deny what they know to be true. They conform to the non-Christian way of thinking and doing, the pattern of this world.

The pattern of this world (literally “this age”) to which we are not to be conformed has both temporal and ethical content. This is certainly a reference to the present period of time lying between the two comings of Christ and which is destined to “pass away” when this age ends at the Second Advent of our Lord. It is also, as Paul says, an “evil” age (Galatians 1:4) characterized by the *stoicheia* (elementary principles of Galatians 4:8-11) and by the signs of the end (listed in 2 Timothy 3:1-9). It is roughly equivalent to John’s ethical use of “world,” or even the eschatological/ethical sense of “flesh.”

Since Paul speaks of the “renewing of the mind,” which is, perhaps a synonym for regeneration (*anakainosis*), he is stating that Christians are “not to think like unbelievers.”<sup>12</sup> The tense of the verb indicates that this renewal of the mind is a continual process in learning to think about the world from the perspective revealed by God in his word. To be renewed in mind is to learn to think God’s thoughts after him. Calvin spoke of this in terms of looking at the world through the spectacles (lens) of Holy Scripture. The result of such thinking, says Paul, is that Christians will be able to “*test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will,*” namely, that which has been revealed in his word (the so-called moral law).

In the words of one writer, “the renewal of the mind enables the believer to discern what is good, what is pleasing to God, and what is perfect. And having discerned it, that same renewal sets him to the task of performing what is seen as the will of God.”<sup>13</sup> Simply put, it means thinking like a Christian (the renewing of the mind is a consequence of regeneration) in contrast to thinking like a pagan (a mind which is conformed to the pattern of this world). This renewal of our minds is not an option for a Christian. It is commanded. Neither is it an option for a Christian to remain in conformity to the worldly way non-Christians think. Such is prohibited.

The practical question remains for us as Christians: “how are we to do this?” The key to this is that Paul

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 434.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 435.

<sup>13</sup> Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 436.

specifically connects this to testing and approving God's will which has already been revealed in his word. Thus what God expects of us is revealed in Scripture. This is his perfect will. The flip side of this is equally important. The fact that God has revealed his perfect will in his word means that we are bound only to the revealed will of God and that we are not bound in any sense to the rules of men, invented because of all kinds of sinful motives. This means that Paul places a distinct intellectual priority in the Christian life. The mind must be renewed so that the heart might follow. And the mind of a Christian is renewed by the Holy Spirit through reflection upon of the word of God and through the proper use of the sacraments. To know God's will, we need only know God's word. But knowing God's perfect will is the prerequisite to obeying God's will. The mind leads and the heart will follow.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us from Paul's exhortation to think like Christians and not like pagans.

First, there is a definite intellectual priority to the Christian life. A renewed mind enables us to discern the perfect will of God which is revealed only in his word, while continued conformity to the pattern of the world can only lead to confusion about the things of God, as well as God's view of his own creation. Thus correct doctrine precedes proper Christian practice although these things are necessarily connected. As Christians we must continually learn about our faith so we can work out our justification in daily life. On a practical level this simply means we must know our Bibles where the will of God is plainly revealed. This is also why catechism is so important. We must teach our children to think like Christians before the culture teaches them to think like pagans. But also don't forget that for a Christian an intellectual life and a devotional life go together. Where the mind leads the heart will follow and both are essential if we are to both renew our minds and avoid conformity to this present age.

Second, so-called "dead orthodoxy" is truly an oxymoron. The heart will follow the mind. John Calvin is absolutely right when he speaks of a heart harder than an iron being unable to obey God. He's also correct to point out that neither can we be motivated to good works by fear or self-interest. To truly know God is to know God's mercy. Unless we understand that we are saved not because we are good but because God is merciful, we'll never get the point, nor will our hearts ever feel genuine gratitude. But once we begin to grasp God's mercy, our hearts cannot help but follow the renewed mind to the divinely ordained goal of regeneration, which is to discern the will of God as it is revealed in his word and as well as to avoid conformity to the pattern of the world.

Third, we need to carefully define worldliness in biblical, and not in fundamentalist terms. Worldliness is being conformed to the pattern of this age. It is thinking like a non-Christian about God and the world, about sin and salvation. Worldliness has nothing to do with fundamentalist taboos against smoking, drinking and so on. Worldliness is thinking that good people go to heaven and that bad people go to Hell, that man-made rules are valuable in keeping us from sin, that religious ceremonies and external righteousness have value before God. Paul exhorts us not to be conformed to such ways of thinking. Rather he exhorts us to renew our minds by learning God's will as it is revealed in his word. In doing so, we will work out our right-standing before God (our justification by faith alone) in daily life and then we will be able to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, which is our spiritual act of worship. Amen!