

Romans 12:1-8

Therefore

Main idea: In light of God's sacrifice, we joyfully sacrifice ourselves.

Jeff and Liesa Holeman had both felt called to overseas missions, but they thought that it would be later in their lives.¹ For the time being, they had successful careers. Jeff was a student minister at a large church, and Liesa was a tax investigator. And they were raising a family, so it just wasn't the ideal time to leave for the mission field.

But sometimes God has other plans for us. Isaiah 55:8-9 says:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

You see, God knows better than us. And I hope that you know that if you wait for what you consider to be ideal circumstances to serve and obey God, then you'll never actually serve and obey God. God calls us to step out in faith.²

So Jeff and Liesa left their plans in order to follow God's plans, and today they are two of our 3,000 IMB missionaries on the international mission field. They're serving in Peru. Jeff was interviewed about his experience in the Baptist Press. He said:

"The reasons to wait were good — a wonderful job as a student minister and a comfortable life. But good is not good when God has something better." -Jeff Holeman

We all know what sacrifice is. In the game of chess, sometimes you have to sacrifice a few pawns, or even your queen, in order to win the game. In the Old Testament, the Jews were commanded to offer animal sacrifices to God.³ And many ancient tribes all over the world regularly engaged in human sacrifices to their false gods, sometimes even sacrificing their own children, a practice which the Bible certainly condemns.⁴

Sacrifice is hard. And it's even harder when the things that we sacrifice have value to us. In fact, I would argue that unless the things that we sacrifice have great value to us, then it's not really a sacrifice.⁵

But it's interesting that in almost all of the examples I mentioned, sacrificing pawns, or your queen, or animals, or even people, we always think of sacrifice as offering something we have. Maybe it costs us a lot, or maybe it costs us just a little, but we think of sacrifice as an offering of something. But in Christianity, we're actually called to a much greater kind of sacrifice. In Christianity, we're called to sacrifice ourselves.⁶

¹ You can read more of their story here:

<https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/new-missionaries-tell-stories-of-sacrifice/>

² Proverbs 3:4-5

³ There are MANY verses talking about this. For example, Exodus 29:10-14

⁴ Leviticus 18:21

⁵ 2 Samuel 24:24

⁶ Matthew 16:24

You may be familiar with the story of Richard Rescorla. Richard Rescorla was working as the security director for Morgan Stanley at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. He worked on the 44th floor of the South Tower. Moments after the first plane hit the North Tower during the terrorist attacks, there was an announcement over the PA system in the South Tower, instructing employees to remain calm and to stay at their desks. Rescorla, however, immediately began instructing employees to evacuate. He directed people to calmly descend the 44 flights of stairs, while he gathered more people from each floor, even after the South Tower was hit by a second plane. And after evacuating more than 2,500 employees, he reentered the building. A colleague shouted to him, "Hey, you need to evacuate, too!" To which he responded, "As soon as I make sure everyone else is out."

Rescorla was last seen on the 10th floor, heading upward, shortly before the South Tower collapsed. His remains were never found. Richard Rescorla sacrificed his own life so that thousands more would be saved.

I hope you know that Jesus sacrificed Himself for you, that you might be saved.⁷ And in a similar way, we're called to sacrifice ourselves for Him and one another.⁸

Romans 12:1-2. Please stand with me for the reading of God's word.

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. 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)

The word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.*

The first eleven chapters of the book of Romans explain the gospel in amazingly clear and shocking ways. If you've never done it before, I encourage you to sit down sometime this week and just read the first eleven chapters of Romans straight through at one time. It will take you about an hour, but it's so worth it, because you'll see how so much of the Bible fits together. It talks about God's purpose in the creation of the world,⁹ and the fall of man,¹⁰ and goes into great detail about the hope of the gospel.¹¹ It's some amazing theology!

If you want to grow in your faith, study the book of Romans. It's like drinking water from a fire hydrant. It's great!

And then, just like there is at some point in almost all of the letters in the New Testament, there's a transition from theology to application, and it's often indicated by the word "therefore." That's what we read in verse 1 of chapter 12.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, (Romans 12:1a)

⁷ 1 John 2:2

⁸ Matthew 22:36-40, Galatians 5:13

⁹ Romans 1:20, Romans 11:32

¹⁰ Romans 1:21, Romans 3:23

¹¹ Romans 5:8, Romans 6:23

So, in the book of Romans, this is the transition from theology to practice. This is a HUGE “therefore!” Paul writes, “I APPEAL to you!” In other words, “I URGE you.” “I can’t stress this enough!” “By the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”

You see, and I hope you already know this, but Christianity is not just about what we believe, but about how we live.

I love this illustration from Francis Chan. What if I told my daughter, “Go clean your room.” And then she comes back an hour later and says, “Dad, I thought about what you said. And I believe you’re right. I even memorized what you said word for word. You said, ‘Go clean your room.’ I can even say it to you in Greek.” Amber would actually probably say it in Spanish. But what if she told me, “I invited my friends over and we’re going to have a study about what it would look like if I cleaned my room.”

And in the same way, Christianity is not just about what we believe, but about how we live. We rest in Jesus by faith, and therefore we rejoice in Jesus with good works.¹²

A lot of Christians want it to be one or the other. A lot of Christians seem to think Christianity is exclusively about salvation in Jesus so that we go to heaven after this life is over. So they receive Jesus as their Savior, but then don’t treat Him as their Lord.¹³

And then there are a lot of other Christians who make Christianity out to be exclusively about serving people, what’s often referred to as the social gospel. But in doing so, they’ve often forgotten about the cross. Jesus didn’t die just to make us nicer people, but so that our sins would be forgiven.¹⁴

It’s not one or the other. The point of the gospel is both so that we would be reconciled to God, and that we would become new creations who become ministers of reconciliation, making it our mission to reconcile the world to God through Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Are you pursuing that as your mission in life?

In Lewis Carroll’s classic book, “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” Alice had a conversation with the Cheshire Cat and asked, “Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the cat. “I don’t much care where,” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the cat.

God has told us which way to go, so don’t just wander through life going whichever way you want. Jesus was the sacrifice for us, so that we would go and be living sacrifices for God and one another.

But notice in verse 1 that it doesn’t actually say that we’re to be living sacrifices, but that we are to be A living sacrifice. In other words, we are many individuals, many bodies, that come together to become one body, and we are to collectively be a living sacrifice.

¹² Ephesians 2:8-10

¹³ Luke 6:46-49

¹⁴ John 3:16

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

That's part of what it means to be a church. We're to covenant together, agree together, promise one another that we're going to stick together. That we're going to serve together, and worship together, and love one another no matter what. And as we do that, it says at the end of verse 1, that we are:

holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1b)

It's true that we're made holy and acceptable to God through Jesus's sacrifice for us,¹⁶ but it's also true that we show ourselves to be holy and acceptable to God by being a living sacrifice as an act of worship. Worship isn't just singing songs on Sunday morning. It's allowing God to transform you in your thoughts and actions. That's what it says in verse 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 12:2)

Maybe you've wondered before what God's will for you is. This is it! God's will for you is to be a living sacrifice.

Now don't miss this. Because I think when we usually read this kind of verse, we think, "Okay, I need to read the Bible so that I'll be better equipped to know God's will in all the things that the Bible doesn't talk about." We wonder about things like jobs, and relationships, and things that pertain to our future, and we want to know God's will for us in those things. And I do think that if we allow God to transform us through His word, then we'll follow God's will in those things, too. But that's not really what this is talking about. When you read verse 2 along with verse 1, it's saying that if you want to be in the center of God's will for your life, don't be conformed to this world, but be a living sacrifice!

That's His good, and acceptable, and perfect will. We can get so consumed with the aspects of God's will that we don't know, like what job we're supposed to have, and who we're supposed to marry, and how many kids we should have, that we often fail to do the will of God that God has made incredibly clear in His word.¹⁷ God essentially says in Romans chapters 1 through 11, "This is the gospel! All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!"¹⁸ But God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!¹⁹ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal through Jesus Christ our Lord!"²⁰ And then we read in chapter 12, "Therefore, present your bodies as a living sacrifice! THIS is your spiritual worship." This is the will of God for you.

And what does it practically look like to be living sacrifice, living in light of God's mercy? Verse 3.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Romans 12:3)

So to be a living sacrifice, first, be humble. I mean, talk about an example of humility! Jesus died for us?!? He's God! And yet he humbled Himself.²¹ So in light of the gospel, how can we possibly exalt ourselves? Don't think of yourself as more highly than you ought.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:30

¹⁷ Here is some of God's will that He has made abundantly clear. 1 Thessalonians 5:14-22

¹⁸ Romans 3:23

¹⁹ Romans 5:8

²⁰ Romans 6:23

²¹ Philippians 2:5-11

Which begs the question, of course: how highly ought we to think of ourselves? Well, number 1, remember that we're sinners saved only by grace.²² We didn't earn our position before God. We're all in the same boat, so we ought to treat each other with humility.

And yet, number 2, remember that in Christ, you have an incredibly high position. You're a child of God.²³ You're a prince or princess of the King.²⁴ But this knowledge of your position shouldn't puff you up, but cause you to even more show people God's love. Because if your Father, your King, your Judge showed you mercy, then we ought to show mercy all the more to the people God has placed in our lives.²⁵ We're to be living sacrifices.

So to be a living sacrifice, living in light of God's mercy, first, be humble. And second, be a servant. Verse 4.

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:4-8)

God has given each believer a function in the body of Christ.

Notice in this passage that God gives us each a different gift. We're not all the same. God has given some of you the amazing ability to speak just the right thing at just the right time. I think that's called prophecy. Others of you are placed into positions in which God uses you to serve others in amazing ways. And Paul names several other functions in the body of Christ. But the point is simply that we're supposed to be active in our faith, and active in using our spiritual gifts both inside and outside the church. God doesn't save anyone just so they would come and sit.

And God calls all of us to some of these things, but gives some of you the ability to do them above and beyond what we might consider to be normal.

I know some of you have the awesome ability of encouraging others. I know because you've used that gift toward me and my family. Are you using that gift to encourage others?

I know some of you have the awesome ability to be generous toward others. You see a need and immediately spring into action. Keep it up! And do it with even more selflessness, pointing people to Jesus as you do.

So what has God gifted you to do? Do it to the glory of God, in service to others.

And once again, we could use our abilities as a means of boasting in ourselves. But Paul tells us to be humble. He tells us to be a living sacrifice. And being a sacrifice is going to cost us something. It's going to cost us our energy, and it's going to cost us our pride, and it's going to cost us our very lives.

²² Ephesians 2:8-9

²³ John 1:12

²⁴ Galatians 4:7

²⁵ Romans 12:17-21

The British pastor John Henry Jowett once said:

"Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing." -John Henry Jowett

In light of God's sacrifice, we are to sacrifice ourselves. Jesus gave His life for us and to us, and calls us to give our lives for Him and to Him.

We're to joyfully live in light of God's mercy.

The missionary David Livingstone once said:

"People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply acknowledging a great debt we owe to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny? It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, foregoing the common conveniences of this life--these may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us." -David Livingstone

God gave His one and only Child for us. That was the greatest of all sacrifices. Maybe that's why the ancient tribes felt it necessary to sacrifice their children to false gods. For them, it was a mistake, a sin, and yet they knew they had to give what was most valuable to themselves in order for it to truly be a sacrifice.

And yet they still didn't give themselves. God doesn't call us to sacrifice our children. He calls us to be a living sacrifice.

And yet, God gave His child to us, that which was most valuable to Himself. But for God, He not only gave His Son, but He gave Himself. This is part of the mystery of the Trinity, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So God didn't heartlessly sacrifice His Son, He gave us His very self in order to show His mercy toward our sin.

Therefore, live in light of God's mercy.