

**+ Romans 12:1-8 + You Are Living Sacrifices + 19th Sunday after Pentecost + 19 October 2014 +**

...So now what? I realize that's a rather strange way to start a sermon, but it's appropriate, isn't it? The last couple weeks we've been focusing on the theme—**"Be who you are in Christ"**.

We were reminded of our identity in Christ. You are **"sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus"** (Galatians 3:26). Your gracious God has given you special status before him—no longer a prisoner of sin or the Law, but a beloved member of God's family and heir to his eternal inheritance.

We were reminded of our purpose in Christ. Rather than find your purpose in your position or your possessions or how others perceive you, the Lord has given you a real, lasting purpose—**"to declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"** (1 Peter 2:9). You are sons of God through faith in Christ who are, therefore, a praise-proclaiming people.

...So now what? What do you do now as a child and heir of the King of kings? What do you do now as a praise-declaring member of God's chosen, holy, royal priestly people? Do you just go back to life as usual thankful that Pastor has finally finished this series on stewardship? Do you just go back to life as usual not realizing how precious your identity and purpose in Christ really are? Do you just go back to life as usual forgetting what you heard or thinking that it's really not all that relevant for your life right now?

Well, the Roman Christians were in a similar predicament. The Apostle Paul had spent eleven beautiful chapters describing and analyzing and proclaiming their identity and purpose in Christ, but how was all that going to impact their life right here and now? Paul had an answer. **"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."** Paul told them to **"sacrifice"**, really to **"be...sacrifices"**.

...But wait a minute! Paul wants you and me to **"be...sacrifices"**? What comes to mind when you think of the word "sacrifice"? It means giving up something—usually something precious or valuable or even priceless. A soldier makes the "ultimate sacrifice" to save his buddies or defend his country. Parents "sacrifice" so their kids can get a good education or a better life, but Paul's talking about more than that, isn't he?

To understand what Paul's talking about here, you need to remember how God's people worshiped back in the Old Testament. For most of the Old Testament era, believers didn't come to church to hear God's Word and to sing hymns. No, their worship typically consisted of sacrifices.

Old Testament priests "sacrificed" bulls and sheep and goats to the Lord on behalf of the people of Israel. The animals were slaughtered. Their blood was collected and poured out before the blazing altar. Depending on the sacrifice, certain portions or even the entire animal were burned up in the fire. That portion sacrificed in fire would be devoted to the Lord. That's what would've come to mind for Paul's readers who had been Jewish in the past.

So is that what the Lord is asking you and me to do now that we know about our identity and purpose in Christ? Should each of us bring our most prized or valuable possession so it can be consumed by fire here on this altar? While that would probably make for a pretty spectacular bonfire, that's not what the Apostle is talking about when he tells us to **"be...sacrifices"**. Paul's not telling us to offer our bodies to the flames either. So what is he talking about? **"I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God..."** Not just **"be...sacrifices"**, but be **"living sacrifices"**. Sounds like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it? How can a sacrifice remain living? How can a sacrifice that I offer be **"holy and pleasing to God"**?

That's the problem. On your own, on my own, not a single one of us can offer anything that is **"holy and pleasing to God"**. By nature, you and I are self-centered. We have treasures. We have talents. We have stuff. We have time, yet by nature, none of us wants to devote any of that to the Lord. You'd rather devote all that to yourself. I'd rather devote it all to myself. Oh, you might put some of those gifts to use for the good of other people, but by nature, there's almost always a self-centered reason for doing so. It makes you look good in the community. It makes you look good in the eyes of your boss. It makes you look good in the eyes of your family or friends.

Sometimes you may even fool yourself into thinking that you can look good in the eyes of the holy God. The reality, however, is that none of us is good enough for the holy God, and therefore, he doesn't like who we are by nature. Every one of us deserves his rejection for our selfish efforts.

So how can the Apostle urge us **“to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...”**? Well, there’s this one little phrase at the beginning that we easily forget—**“in view of God’s mercy”**.

Do you realize what that means? Rather than look at you with the wrath you deserve, God in his undeserved love looked at you with mercy and compassion. That mercy moved him to make reality what all those Israelite sacrifices foreshadowed. God sent his Son to be **“THE ultimate sacrifice”** for you and me. Rather than punish you for your self-centered guilt, Jesus lived every moment as **“a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God”**. Jesus devoted his life to faithfully using all his gifts as true God and true man to be your substitute in life. Then he gave himself up as the perfect sacrifice for all the guilt of your sins—the evil you have done and the good you have failed to do, even for your selfishness. The holy God received that sacrifice and it pleased him, because it paid for all your sins and reconciled you to himself.

That little phrase, **“in view of God’s mercy”**, is the only thing that makes being a **“living sacrifice holy and pleasing to God”** a reality. Let’s go back to our question from the beginning of the sermon, **“...So now what?”** If we’re going to be **“living sacrifices”**, what does that mean? What does it look like? How will it play out in your daily life?

Being a **“living sacrifice”** means no longer conforming to the world’s pattern for service. Paul urges us, **“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.”** By the world’s pattern, the sacrificial service you carry out may help others, even greatly, but your motivation always comes back to you. You do it to please yourself, to serve self, to promote self. It’s not difficult for your sinful nature to be humble on the outside, while enjoying the glory and praise on the inside, but that’s not being a **“living sacrifice”**.

Instead you seek to do what is **“holy and pleasing to God”**. You focus on pleasing God—not to earn his favor, but **“in view of his mercy”**. You focus on doing his will rather than yours—and sometimes there’s nothing glorious about that. You might even face some opposition for doing God’s will, but what’s that compared to thanking the Lord who saved you?

Being a **“living sacrifice”** means being honest about yourself and humble about what God has made you. Paul urges, **“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”** It comes very naturally to every one of us to think we’re something special. That starts when we’re little children and increases as we get older. You and I often fall into the trap of looking down on others and thinking too highly of ourselves, but remember who you were—a prisoner of sin and the Law. Remember how you have no purpose apart from Christ.

How humbling it is to know what God has made each of us through faith in Christ Jesus! How humbling it is to know that God has given us the purpose, really the privilege to declare his praises with lives of light in this dark world. How humbling it is to know that God accepts our **“living sacrifices”** to him as acts of his beloved children, his **“chosen people”**.

That humble realization leads you and me to turn the focus of our sacrificial service away from ourselves and outwards towards others—towards your neighbor, the one whom God has placed in your path to serve, and towards those with whom you serve. You see, being **“living sacrifices”** means belonging to everyone else whom Jesus has rescued.

Paul tells us, **“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given.”** As believers in Christ, we are the body of Christ with Christ as our head. Within this body of Christ, each of us has different roles and functions. We work together with the different gifts that God gives to each of us—talents, abilities, time, treasures—all together serving the same Lord.

So how can you be a **“living sacrifice”** with the gifts God has given you? We go back to that little phrase, **“in view of God’s mercy”**. If the Lord has given you the ability to explain God’s Word clearly, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift. If the Lord has given you a servant’s heart, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift. If the Lord has enabled you to teach children or adults, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift. If the Lord has given you a heart for encouraging others, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift. If the Lord has given you earthly treasures, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift generously. If the Lord has

molded you into a leader of God's people, then ***"in view of God's mercy"*** use that gift diligently. If the Lord has given you a merciful heart for those in need, then ***"in view of God's mercy"*** use that gift cheerfully.

Maybe the Lord has given you the gift of prayer or planning or using your hands to build and fix or a love for souls that wants to tell others about the Savior or holding up the prophet's hands or a welcoming spirit. However our gracious God has gifted you, remember who you are in Christ. Remember what your purpose is in Christ. Then ***"in view of God's mercy...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God."*** To him alone be glory forever. Amen.