

**+ Romans 12:1-8 (NIV11) + Series: Why Are We Here? + Theme: ...To Connect People to God's Work +
+ 22nd Sunday after Pentecost + 16 October 2016 +**

"What a waste!" ESPN reports the downfall of another star athlete—extraordinarily gifted, but so foolish when his abilities make him wealthy. "What a waste!" Another former Disney child star with amazing musical or acting skills graces the cover of another tabloid with unflattering pictures of her bottoming out with drugs and alcohol. "What a waste!" A loved one gifted with great intelligence chooses to slide through school and settles for a dead-end job. "What a waste!" A friend, whom you always assumed would be "Most Likely to Succeed," ends up getting in trouble and ruining their life.

"What a waste!" Why do you think that when you see the gifted and talented fall into ruin? When an athlete or a celebrity or a loved one or a friend is truly gifted, we take notice. We see so much talent. We see so many gifts and so many possibilities, but as time goes on and gifts are used poorly or for the wrong reasons, you can't help, but think regretfully, "What a waste!"

...But what about the use of your gifts and talents? Do you ever look back on your past and regretfully wonder if you could've used your gifts better? Perhaps you haven't had that thought yet. Perhaps you haven't thought about the fact that you could waste those gifts from God. Yet today our God urges us to be faithful with every gift that he gives to each of us as we connect ourselves and others with God's work.

I hate to admit it, but Satan really knows what he's doing. He's more crafty and deceitful than we give him credit. He knows it's unlikely that he'll be able to make most Christians fall with obvious sins like murder or stealing or adultery. Oh, he gets some Christians to fall with those temptations, but he has to be craftier to get the rest of us to fall. So he makes you comfortable. He makes you a little lazy, even apathetic. "Yes, I'm a Christian. I go to church nearly every week. I throw a little money in the offering plate, maybe even help out once in a great while. I devote a couple hours each week to spending time with God just like I'm supposed to do. That's good enough, isn't it?"

Sadly, that comfortable, apathetic attitude is just as dangerous as the racy ad or the lure of easy wealth. If Satan can get you to think that your life of service to the Lord and your life of worship consist of about 1-2 hours each Sunday here at church, then you have a problem. Is such a short-sighted, limited view of serving the Lord and worshiping him really a faithful use of God's gifts? In reality, Satan is trying to weaken your faith in Jesus like muscles that don't get used and eventually wither away with atrophy. So what do you do? How do you escape that dangerous apathy towards serving the Lord? The Apostle Paul has an answer. ***"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."***

When you think of the word "sacrifice," what comes to mind? You probably think of someone or something giving up life. A soldier makes the ultimate sacrifice to save his buddies or defend her country. The Old Testament priests sacrificed bulls and sheep and goats to the Lord on behalf of the people of Israel. The animals were slaughtered, and depending on the sacrifice, certain portions or the entire animal were burned up in the fire. That portion sacrificed in fire was then devoted to the Lord.

Yet Paul urges you ***"to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God..."*** A ***"living sacrifice"*** sounds like a contradiction in terms, but it's really not. How can a sacrifice to the Lord be ***"living"***? Rather than bring animals to the Lord for sacrifice, you devote your life—every moment, every gift—to the true God. Yet how can you devote your life as a ***"living sacrifice"*** to the Lord and offer ***"true and proper worship"***?

You see, there's a 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. Yes, we have gifts. We have talents. We have treasures. We have time, but by nature, none of us wants to devote any of that to the Lord. You'd rather devote all of that to yourself. I'd rather devote it all to myself. Oh, you might put some of those gifts and talents and time and treasures to use for the good of others, but by nature, there's almost always a self-centered reason for doing it. It makes you look good in the community or in the eyes of your boss or in the eyes of your family or friends. Maybe it even makes me look good in the eyes of God, or at least, that's what we fool ourselves into thinking with very little urging from Satan. What you and I really deserve is what our self-centeredness gets us. We're not good enough for the holy God, and he certainly doesn't like who we are by nature. We deserve his wrath and rejection for our selfish efforts.

So how can Paul urge us **“to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God...”**? Well, look back at the beginning of our reading and you’ll find an important little phrase there: **“In view of God’s mercy.”**

Do you understand what that means? Rather than look at you with the wrath you deserve, God in his undeserved love looks 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 us for our self-centered guilt, our selfless Savior was truly **“a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”** Jesus’ life was devoted to faithfully using all his gifts as One who was truly God and truly human to be our substitute in life. Then he gave himself up as the perfect sacrifice for all the guilt of your sins and mine. God received that sacrifice and it pleased him, because it paid for all our sins and reconciled us with himself.

With that same mercy, God then took sinful human beings—you and me—and transformed us from worthless, hostile enemies deserving eternal death to beloved children of God who no longer conform to the ways of this world. Now **“in view of God’s mercy,”** your life is **“a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”** Your life is devoted to worshiping our merciful God, who saved us from eternity in hell. You faithfully use your God-given gifts not for yourself, but as a daily sacrifice of thanks to him who rescued you.

If Paul is urging you to use all your God-given gifts—your talents, time, treasures—in God’s service, how will you do that? He encourages you to be humble as you use God’s gifts. **“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”**

Why would Paul encourage us to be humble as we use the precious gifts we each possess? Paul wants you to realize that every one of those gifts—every physical gift, every spiritual gift, every material gift—comes from the hand of your gracious God. None of us has earned or deserved anything—any blessing, any gift, any talent, any treasure from God, but yet in his mercy, he pours out gifts on each of us abundantly, even **“the faith God has distributed to each of you.”** Yes, even faith in God comes solely from him.

That makes you part of something bigger. **“For 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, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.”** Paul loves to use that picture of the “body of Christ” to describe who we are—Christ’s church with Jesus as the head and each of us as important parts of his body. As with the human body, where each part has a unique function to assist the body or make it function properly, so also each of us has different roles and functions within the body of Christ. As parts of Christ’s body, we work together with all the different gifts that God gives to each of us—talents, abilities, interests, time, energy, treasures—all used together to serve the same Lord of the Church.

So what gift or gifts has the Lord given to you? How can you connect with God’s work and faithfully use the gifts that God has given to you? Paul writes, **“If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”** This is certainly not the complete list of gifts that God graciously gives to his people, but the Lord gives us this gift list to make each of us think how we can serve him **“in view of God’s mercy.”**

If the Lord has given you the ability to expound and explain God’s Word to young and old, 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 building up and encouraging fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift. If the Lord has given you earthly treasures, perhaps even in abundance, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift generously. If the Lord has molded you into a shepherd of God’s flock, a leader of God’s people, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift diligently. If the Lord has given you the ability and desire to show mercy to those in need, then **“in view of God’s mercy”** use that gift cheerfully. Maybe your gift is prayer or using your hands to build and fix or a love for souls that wants to tell others about your Savior or supporting your pastor and elders or a welcoming spirit. However your gracious God has gifted you, **“in view of God’s mercy”** connect to God’s work and use his gifts!

No matter the gift or gifts that God has given to you, their highest and best use is always in service to him. That doesn’t mean that your highest and best service to the Lord always has to be “in church” or as part of a church

function. After all, God has graciously given you and me unique callings in the home, in society, and in the church to serve him by serving others. Yet no matter your calling, no matter your gift, the Lord wants you to use his gifts.

Our God has given you precious, extraordinary gifts purely out of unconditional love, gifts not to be foolishly wasted. What will you do with those gifts? How will you use those gifts? ***“In view of God’s mercy”*** we will use them faithfully. We will use them diligently. We will use them to the glory and praise of our merciful God! Amen.