



“Reasonable Worship”¹

Romans 12:1-2

In my life, I’ve found a discouraging trend in many sermons. Instead of sermons focusing on God and how God, and his Word, apply to your life; many pastors will focus on you, the problems your facing and then give comforting verse so that God can help you on your way. In a sociological study done about 12 years ago, a man named Christian Smith studied the beliefs of teenagers across America and across different religious perspectives. He discovered that in practice, most teens essentially believed the same thing. He dubbed it as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” God exists, but he’s not really engaged in our lives. He just wants us to be relatively moral, and whenever I’m down, he’s there to pick me up emotionally.

This is not Christianity. This is more like Romans 1 theology. In Romans 1 we discover that people suppress the truth about God and they do not value him supremely. As a result, because God is eternally worthy, all manners of sins proceed from our lives. And, I would say this moralistic, therapeutic deism is sin as well. People suppress the reality of God and they make God a genie or a lucky rabbit’s foot. This defames the Lord. It doesn’t worship him. But all humans, myself included, are stuck in this sin unless God does something.

And, thankfully God has done something. Instead of God utterly rejecting all humans, Paul shows us in Romans how God the Son (Jesus) has come to this earth in order to be a new representative for humanity. He obeyed God perfectly, and he also, in his death, took human beings’ sins on himself and satisfied God’s justice against sin. Over and over in Romans, Paul says that now a right standing with God comes through depending on Jesus on your behalf. If you trust Jesus, then you are reconciled with God. And, in being reconciled with God, who is life, you are now set free to live out your purpose again: to worship God. It’s like you were a bird who was mute, and then upon looking to Jesus for rescue, God gave you a voice! This worship is central to your being as a Christian.

But what is worship? Worship is simply agreeing with and declaring God’s supreme worth! No longer do you suppress the truth about God, you now want to see and grow in declaring how worthy God is in *all* you do, say and think. So, true Christianity is a loving relationship of dependence on the Lord.

This is the trajectory of Paul in the book of Romans. As Paul moves to the end of Romans 11, we saw last week that healthy theology leads to hearty worship. In 11:33-36, Paul gives the Roman church a hymn to sing, which declares the infinite gloriousness of God. Now, on the basis of this worshipful transition, Paul moves into chapter 12, and the verses we’re looking at today provide the framework for the rest of the book of Romans. These words are directed towards Christians in particular, and the teaching in these

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

chapters show what it looks like to be a people who worship God as opposed to people who suppress the truth about God and embrace a lie. So, let's read Romans 12:1-2 together after I pray (First Baptist of Holland, MacPhail-Faussey).

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. ²

Ok, I'm going to give you fair warning here. I'm going to give a brief language lesson right now because it's valuable in understanding the apostle Paul's writings. The majority of verbs Paul uses in at least the first half of *every single letter* he writes are indicative. Then, when Paul transitions to the second half of the letter, he shifts to imperative verbs. Right now, some of you might be googling, "Define 'indicative.'" But I'll tell you. An indicative is a verb that is simply a statement of fact. I could say, "You are holy." That's a statement of fact. But an imperative is a command. So, I could say, "Be holy." That's a command.

Why does Paul write this way? He does it to help form a foundation for a Christian's obedience. He doesn't tell people that they need to obey in order to be accepted. Instead, even in his writing style, he shows them that they are accepted; and as a result, they need to obey. They are holy; therefore, they are to act holy. But, what's interesting in the book of Romans is that Paul doesn't shift to his imperative section until after 11 chapters! This is the longest wait, and in reading through 11 chapters, we have this glorious foundation of grace upon which to build our obedience.

Paul makes this transition clear in his wording of verse 1. I appeal to you therefore. . . . The "therefore" connects us to what was said previously. What did he say previously? Well, you could think that Paul is only referring to what he said at the end of chapter 11: from him, through him and to him belong all things! However, I think the "therefore" is referring to all that Paul has said up to this point. And, the reason why I think this is because he says that he appeals to them by the mercies of God. The word "by" probably means "on the basis of" or "because of" the mercies of God. Putting "therefore" and "mercies of God" in the plural, I think we have a statement where Paul is saying that he appeals to us based on the vastness of God's mercies that have been displayed in every word of every page of this letter. And, in this first verse of chapter 12, Paul tells us what he's calling us to do in response to God's grace. This is the main idea of the sermon, these two verses, and actually the main thrust of the remaining chapters: **Present yourself to God as a sacrifice.**

Paul doesn't simply say to have God in your side-pocket if you are in a bond. Nor does he say that God is now your sidekick. He uses temple terminology of sacrifice. This shows us that God's grace isn't given so that sin can abound. God's grace is given so that we can worship God in our beliefs, words and actions! But before we get into this main point of the text, I want to explain a couple phrases to emphasize the importance of this imperative, this command.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 12:1-2.

First, we have the word “**appeal**.” There have been times that I’ve had the idea that appeal is kind of like Paul begging. However, that’s an incorrect idea. To beg would mean that God, through Paul, is really hoping that we will follow his command. To beg indicates an idea that we are the superior and God, through Paul is the inferior. “Beg” is not the right idea. So maybe others of you might think that appeal is more like making a request. However, that would be wrong as well. The word “appeal” has the idea of authority behind it. So, think of it in a way like a summons. You can be summoned to something and deny the summons, but a summons is very serious. So, for a child of God to be summoned to something is very serious, and if we deny the summons, we do it to our own harm.

Second, notice the word “**brothers**.” Paul is talking to all of us (Jews and Gentiles) as people who are part of the family of God. God isn’t calling us to these steps of obedience because we need to make ourselves acceptable to him. We are already accepted. We are children of God, sons and daughters. Now, we are summoned to act like the family we are.

This truly is grace-based motivation. In view of God’s mercies, because we are children of God, we are to present ourselves to God. Ventura, I hope you appreciate this biblical logic. There are many times we use fear to motivate obedience, and honestly, it only works for a little while. This past week, I went to a parent meeting for Isaiah’s driver’s education class. In that, they showed the damages of texting and driving. It was all emotionally fear-driven. It felt effective, but I also know that in my life, fear-based motivation usually dies away. Why? Because it really is only focused on yourself. When you’re no longer afraid of the consequences, you’ll go and do that thing. Fear-based obedience isn’t obedience, it’s just a way to manage people’s selfishness.

But what about grace-based obedience? Have you ever done something kind because someone loves you and you feel secure with them? That’s a whole different type of commitment. As a child, because I knew my parents loved me, I didn’t want to hurt them. I loved them and I wanted to show that to them. Sure, they could discipline me, but I didn’t simply want to not disobey because I’d get hurt. They loved me and they showed me that every day.

How much more with God. He doesn’t simply want our actions. He has shown us in myriads of ways his tremendous love for us. He has set us free to love and worship him. Now, based on the mercies of God, present your whole self to God.

With this backdrop, we can now better describe what it means to **present yourself to God as a sacrifice**.

Paul tells us to present our bodies as a sacrifice. This term for body doesn’t have to only mean our physical body, but it can refer to our whole self. One man named Douglas Moo writes, “**It is not only what we can give that God demands; he demands the giver. . . . Paul is making a special point to emphasize that the sacrifice we are called to make requires a dedication to the service of God in the harsh and often ambiguous life of this world**” (Moo, pp. 750-51). God is summoning our whole selves for his service. Do you see being a disciple of Jesus this way? Think about the disciples and how Jesus called all of them to leave their nets and even their families to follow him.

I think of this letter to the Roman church. Within ten years of writing this letter, the Christians in Rome were under persecution from Nero. The apostles Paul and Peter will be killed in this persecution, and likely, recipients of this letter were found dead as well. Why? Because they presented themselves to God to show that God is of greater worth than even their own lives.

Christianity isn't merely moralistic, therapeutic deism. Christianity is a whole way of life. Christianity confesses Jesus is King and Lord and Master and you follow him wherever he leads. Christianity proclaims that we die to ourselves and live to righteousness. Christianity adheres to Jesus' words when he said, "25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?3 In other words, Christianity proclaims sacrifice!

This term "sacrifice" causes us to think of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Yet, our sacrifice is different. This word "sacrifice" is quite confrontational in our culture. I remember several years ago hearing a missionary speak of living in the area she lived and how some Americans would wonder how she and her family could do it because of the threat of persecution. You know what she said to us? She essentially said, "I pray for you with all the comforts you have! These comforts can lull you into not pursuing Jesus with zeal." I was confronted then, and I'm still confronted to this day. This past week, I read an article in USA Today, written by the President and CEO of Open Door ministries, calling the American church to wake up. He writes about rising persecution of Christians around the globe, and then he makes this stinging statement: Inoculated by entertainment and self-absorption, [the American Christians] are completely detached from the experience of the global church. The American church is feeding itself to death while the worldwide church is being murdered. Obviously this isn't every Christian in America, and people shouldn't be shamed for living here. However, I wonder how much we think about our calling to be true sacrifices for Christ every day, in all things.

This past week, I came across a quote from a man named Erasmus, who gave us the first full Greek manuscript of the New Testament, in the 16th century. He wrote this concerning Romans 12: **Sacrifice your disposition to pride rather than a young calf, slay your boiling anger instead of a ram, [kill] your lust instead of a goat, sacrifice to God the lascivious and seductive thoughts of your mind instead of pigeons and doves. These are sacrifices truly worthy of a Christian; these are victims pleasing to Christ** (as quot. in George, p. 122).

Now, again, I'm not saying that we should feel guilty for living in America and having many freedoms and joys in our culture. What I am saying is that when we have a hot day or when it's raining or when someone cuts us off on the road or when there's a whiff of having some rights taken away from us in America, we act as though we're suffering for Christ's name. We also have times when we go do service projects and for those hours or days we are serving, we are tired and exhausted, but then we come back home and get back to regularly scheduled routines that are more peaceful for us. Or, with our temptations and sins, some don't really fight against them. They say it's so difficult, but what about the grace God gives to our brothers and sisters who are literally on the brink of death because of their faith? God's grace is bigger and more powerful than we want to believe. His grace is so great we can be sacrifices for him every day.

But what does this look like? Paul actually uses three adjectives to help us understand what the word "sacrifice" means: living, holy, and acceptable. Interestingly, most translations say, "living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God." However, it would be more accurate to say either living, holy, acceptable-to-God sacrifice or sacrifice that is living, holy and acceptable to God. The reason I'm making a distinction here is because sometimes people read "**living** sacrifice" and they think that they're physically alive as opposed to the dead sacrifices in the Old Testament. However, that's not the idea that Paul has in mind here. Think back to Romans 6:11, which says, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 16:25–26.

alive to God in Christ Jesus.”⁴ Paul is telling us to consider ourselves alive to God because we are alive to God, having been united with Jesus and his life. So, when Paul says that we are living sacrifices, he is saying that we are spiritually alive. We are sacrifices that have the life of God running through us.

This is important for us to emphasize because a lot of people can sacrifice a lot of things for people, but the call is to be a sacrifice, not simply give God things. You can “sacrifice” and not be dependent on the Lord, loving him. The living sacrifice is speaking to the spiritual life given through faith in Jesus - no matter what the cost or pains may be, Jesus is worth it! As Paul wrote in 8:18, the sufferings of this life aren’t worth comparing to the glories to be revealed!

The next adjective Paul uses is “holy.” The term holy simply means to be set apart. In the temple system, utensils could be dedicated as “**holy**” in the use of the temple. They were used in the worship practices. Well, now Paul says that we are to be a sacrifice that is “holy.” In other words, in all we do, show the worth of God. To be holy is to be set apart unto God and to live a holy life is to reveal that you do what you do because of God. That is worship! As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “³¹So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”⁵

As a sacrifice, show the life you’ve been given. As a sacrifice, show that you are set apart unto God, by his grace! And then, as a sacrifice, know that you are **acceptable to God!** We all live with desires for acceptance. Maybe you wish you were accepted more by a parent or your family. Maybe you wish your boss would acknowledge you and your hard work. Maybe you feel shunned by certain people and always feel a little unaccepted by whatever group you’re a part of. This longing for acceptance is inherent within us as human beings. And Paul says that those of us who are God’s children, who have trusted Jesus, are acceptable unto God. And, our lives of sacrifice are acceptable unto him! Nothing we do goes unnoticed by our loving, heavenly Father. In fact, even though all we do is done by the provision of his grace, he will even reward us someday in eternity future! You may wonder if following God is worth it. You could be tempted to think, “But if I take this job or if I just get angry at this person or if I am a workaholic and set aside retirement now, I’ll get what I want and then I will follow God.” But those things will never give you the security that your soul longs for. Only the acceptance of God can fill your soul. And only those who trust in and follow Jesus will know the security and joy of that acceptance because in God is fullness of joy. In Christ is the fullness of all blessing!

As we live lives of sacrifice to God then, fellow Christians, and the world around us can see who and what we value most. And, as we live this life of sacrifice, our hearts are also drawn closer to the Lord as we endure and grow in dependence on him.

But I know an objection that can be thrown out: Why would I ever want to live this way? Sounds like following Jesus is a death sentence. Well, in one sense, you’re right. To be a sacrifice means that you die countless deaths to yourself every day, and it can mean living through persecution for God’s glory. But that question reveals that you may not understand just how *glorious* God and his mercies are! Paul has already said the reason why we would live this way. He says “because of the mercies of God.” This is why you would live this way. If you are astounded by all that God has given to you, a treasonous sinner, and then has set his love and kindness on you so that his grace is greater than all your sin and you are loved by the Eternal God. If you know that you are adopted into his family and his Spirit empowers you to grow in obedience. If you know there is no condemnation for you and that God is working all things

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 6:11.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 10:31.

together for his glory and your godliness – and someday you will see him in a perfect world – then it only makes sense to live for him in all things! He is worthy.

Last Sunday night, I gave an illustration about how great my wife is. I said that when I was a child, I collected coins, and I would study those coins to ensure what condition they were in and to evaluate their worth. I had a nice collection, given my age and income. I had a couple gold coins as well. But when I met Tracy, coin-collecting essentially stopped. I began to spend my money on things Tracy-related. Whether that was on my phone bill or gasoline for the car or minimizing savings. Tracy was worth all of that. This is the motivation Paul is giving here. He's not trying to guilt the Christians into obedience. He's spent 11 chapters to show the great worth of God, and he's saying that this type of life is the practical result! Is God worthy to you or not? And, if you say "no," then I would urge you to consider whether or not you truly are a Christian. And, if you are a Christian, then I'd urge you to pray that your love and awe of God would increase.

Paul goes on and says that this type of sacrificial living is your "spiritual worship." Now, depending on the translation you have in your laps, you could read, "reasonable service" or "spiritual service" or "true and proper worship." But, I prefer "reasonable worship." The term "service" is correct; however, biblically, the idea of worship comes along with service – and in our day, we can serve someone and love love them. We don't even have to know someone to give them good service. But you have to know someone in order to worship them! Now, let's get to the idea behind "reasonable." The reason some translations say "spiritual" is because this word, in ancient manuscripts and in the Bible connects with another word that has the idea of "spiritual." However, this word does not only mean spiritual even though it's used in connection sometimes. The reason I don't prefer "true and proper" is because it's not strong enough. This word really does mean reasonable and rational. As Thomas Schreiner puts it, ". . . **yielding one's whole self to God is eminently reasonable. Since God has been so merciful, failure to dedicate one's life to him is the height of folly and irrationality**" (Schreiner, p. 645).

When you know Jesus and become aware of what reconciliation with God includes, you live for the Kingdom of God with greater fervor and delight. It's only reasonable to worship this God exclusively in all avenues of life.

Knowing this, you could say, "Ok, but how do we do this then? I get being a sacrifice. Does that mean I have to go to a persecuted country?" No. Paul gives us the basic stepping stones in verse 2. Let's read it again: 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. ⁶

How?

Do not be conformed to this world. To be conformed is to be molded by something. Every Christmas, Tracy likes to make Christmas cookies with her grandmother's molds. She makes the dough and then hands dough to the children. We don't know what the dough will look like, but then a child picks up a reindeer. When they insert that into the dough, what's the cookie going to look like? A reindeer! Well, Paul says that as Christians, there's a threat to be brought into the mold of this world. We are to resist this.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 12:2.

But right here you could have a wrong view of what “the world” means. I used to think “world” simply meant anything that looked or felt rebellious. To be worldly only dealt with external appearances, but that’s not what the word means. The world, simply understood, is thinking that aligns with the present system that rejects God as Supreme. It’s beliefs and practices that ignore and suppress the truth about God and his gospel. So, in modern vernacular, we could say every self-help book written by a secularist is worldly philosophy. You could say, “But they have some good stuff.” Of course! Every lie has to have truth in it or it wouldn’t hold any water. But anything that is void of God’s grace in Jesus and doesn’t point to the glory of God is the world. And Paul says to not be conformed by it.

Does this mean we shouldn’t read books by non-Christians or listen to people who have secular philosophy? No! The apostle Paul himself quotes Greek philosophers in the Scripture! The point is to not be conformed by it. Know when things are not ultimately focused on Christ. You could be a moral person and be conformed to this world. Let me ask you this, “Is a person more or less godly if they have a six-month emergency fund?” Answer: that’s a bad question! Paul says to the Corinthians that the Macedonians are an example of giving because they gave out of poverty. Yet, in our culture, we think, “That’s stupid!” Let me ask you another question, “Is a Republican a Christian or an Independent a Christian?” False question! Yet, many people tend to think that all the values of their political party are infallible and biblical – whereas Jesus says that every kingdom of this world will pass away. Listen, consumerism is a god in this age, and we need to be careful.

If Jesus is our Lord and King, we must be asking, “How is my thinking being conformed to this world?” A good way to see whether or not we’re affected is by asking this, **“Does this thinking lead me to glory in God for *who he is*, and cause me to live as a sacrifice or does this thinking lead me to glory in God for what he gives me, and cause me to call others to live as a sacrifice (and judge them if they don’t)?”** The worldly mindset calls people to die for themselves and their values – as they climb up the ladder. Jesus calls us to follow in his steps and die for his glory, not ours. Do not be conformed to this world. Instead,

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. This word for transformed has the idea of being radically changed. The only way to combat being conformed to this world is by being transformed. And the only way we’re transformed is through the renewal of our minds. Healthy theology leads to hearty worship in words and practice!

Notice here that the renewing isn’t a one time thing. It’s not like we say on one day, “I’m going to read my Bible,” and then we’re good to go for the next year. This word “renewing” is in the present tense, which is probably indicating an ongoing action in our lives. The world is constantly preaching messages to us. We’re constantly told what we need to live for, how we are to be satisfied. Our own flesh tries to get us to believe that food, money, power, sex, control are all going to satisfy us.

Isn’t that true? Ladies, how often do you believe the world’s (or your own flesh’s) message that you are ugly? Men, how often do you believe the world’s (or your own flesh’s) message that you must succeed with money and in the job? How often do you believe that bite of food will really satisfy or that video game is going to get your mind off your problems? The renewing of our minds is a constant. This should encourage us because I know many people who will say, “I tried, but it just didn’t work.” And, my response is, “Are you persevering?” Some are exhausted by thinking this way. Some even may think, “But when am I going to get to a point to where there’s no fight?” My answer: Heaven. Until then, we make war against our flesh and the world. Keep going! Keep renewing your mind.

And, how do we renew our minds? Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 3:18: 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.** ⁷ We are transformed as the Spirit causes us to behold the glory of the Lord Jesus. And where do we encounter Jesus with our minds? In the Word. And, as we ponder Jesus in the Word, we meditate upon him. And as we think more about Jesus, our lives, our actions, our mindset changes. So, the answer to what it means to renewing our minds is to fill your mind with the Word of God – and meditate on Jesus day and night!

To present your whole self as a sacrifice to God means that you refuse to be conformed to this world and you proactively persevere in studying the Word and pondering Jesus, by the strength of the Spirit!

So, practical application for you, Christian. If you are not regularly in the Word, and if you are not trying to see how the Scriptures lead you to God's glory in Jesus, you are not being transformed. You may become moral, but you're not a sacrifice that's showing spiritual life, holiness and acceptance. If that doesn't make sense to you, all I can say is get in the Word, and the more you're in the Word, pray that the Spirit would open your eyes to rejoice in the Lord and live for him. The more you study Him, the more he will change your own thinking. And, this is precisely what Paul goes on to say. As your mind is renewed, by testing you will grow to discern what God's will is.

The testing is referring to the trials of life. Through the circumstances of life – the ups and downs – as you've been growing in the Lord, the Lord will apply his truth to the various things in life. And, as you go through these situations, you'll be able to grow in discerning God's will. Now, please, keep in mind that "God's will" is referring to God's moral will. This is not saying that if you are in the Word, you'll know how to make the big decisions in life. That's what I thought in High School. "What's your will, God? Should I marry Tracy or not?" That's not what "God's will" is referring to. It's referring to obedience. As you grow in the Word, you'll increase in knowing what it looks like to obey God day-by-day.

And, by the way, this word "discern" should be highlighted. This word "discern" is the exact opposite of "reprobate" in Romans 1. If you remember, Paul says that every human being in this world is "reprobate." It's not just those who exchange natural affections that Paul is talking about. He says *every* human being is undiscerning, so they go off into all sorts of sins – from sexual deviancy to disobeying parents. But now, in Romans 12, Paul says that on the basis of God's mercies in Christ, he has saved a people who can live in worship of him, and this people now have discerning minds – not reprobate minds. Therefore, we actually can agree with God that his will truly is good, acceptable and perfect.

Do you want to live like the world that knows God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die? Or, do you want to live in the good, acceptable and perfect; worshipping the Lord, living as a sacrifice? If you have truly depended on Jesus, then you would say "yes!" Or, at least you would pray to the Lord for grace and help to say "yes." If you haven't trusted in Christ, I pray that you would see that while this world might offer smooth sailing, it's a pathway to death. I pray you'd see that God's gift of eternal life is greater than whatever this world can offer. I pray you'd turn from your sin and turn to God for the grace he has in Christ!

And, I pray for all of us: that we would actively think about presenting ourselves day-by-day, moment-by-moment to our Lord, remembering that we are alive, holy and acceptable. Let's pray for wisdom to live out our identity in Christ as we immerse ourselves in the Word and depend on the Spirit to grow us in rejoicing in God and his will for our lives.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 2 Co 3:18.

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