

“The Best Gift We Can Give God”

Romans 12:1-12

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Communion Devotion

This morning our attention is drawn to some of the most profound words attributed to the Apostle Paul. It appears everything written in the first eleven chapters of Romans prepared the foundation for these two verses, and the chapters that followed reinforced their importance.

To appreciate the value of these two verses, you must understand why Paul wrote this book. Paul used Romans as a way of introducing himself to the Christians in Rome, whom he had never met.

It was Paul’s intent to visit Rome after traveling to Jerusalem. He was eager to meet the Jesus followers in the largest city in the Roman Empire and to have the opportunity to preach to them.

Paul used this letter, which was probably dictated to a scribe while he was in Corinth or Philippi while on his third missionary journey, to prepare the way for his upcoming visit. Through this letter, Paul explained in advance what he believed and what was important to him as a disciple of Christ.

Why did Paul do this? He wanted his readers to know how seriously he took his faith. That divine encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus radically changed Paul’s life. The love of power was replaced with the power of love, which changed Paul’s outlook on life.

Because of God's great love for him expressed through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Paul gave his entire life to God to be used in God's service. This included his time, talents, resources and influence. All Paul had was to be used every day to advance the kingdom of God, a level of involvement in and commitment referred to as a "living sacrifice."

Paul then encouraged every one of the Christians in Rome to follow his example. Listen to how he wrote this challenge.

"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--God's good, pleasing and perfect will."

(Romans 12:1-2)

I am intrigued by the image Paul used to describe his commitment to God and the work to which God called him. He offered himself as a "living sacrifice" to God.

What did Paul mean by this phrase, "living sacrifice?" Obviously, it harkened back to the days of taking an animal to the temple for the purpose of sacrificing it in worship as an act of obedience, humility, contrition and gratitude.

Paul was telling his readers, though, they no longer needed to sacrifice an animal while in worship to demonstrate their love for God. The gift God desired was them, their lives in service to Him at all times and in every place. It was a "living sacrifice" God longed to receive from each of them.

Specifically, what does it mean to be a "living sacrifice?"

A living sacrifice is a commitment of one's whole life to God and God's work. Nothing is withheld, and under no circumstances is this commitment ever suspended.

Everything you have is to be used the way God would use it if it was God's, which it really is. Selfishness or fear should not determine how you use or hoard what God has given you. The potential to change people's lives and make hope visible should be the driving force.

Every word you speak is to reflect the heart and nature of God. Your family members and friends should know God better because they know you. Don't send conflicting messages to those around you.

Every decision you make should honor and please God. Bring a smile to God's face, not tears to God's eyes when God observes the way you treat people, handle problems, respond to temptation, resolve conflict, keep promises, do your work, confront evil, identify with the oppressed, pursue justice, encourage those who are struggling, accept others as they are, forgive those who have hurt you, seek forgiveness from those you have harmed, earn and spend your money and build bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation to all people.

As you go through the course of each day, seek God's will and do it to the best of your ability. It is not your kingdom you are building but God's. Never lose sight of this goal.

Why should we make this deep level of commitment to God and become involved in God's work? This cannot be an easy promise to keep or road to travel. Why should we do this?

For starters, Paul did, and he never regretted it. Paul was not asking anything of his readers, including us, he was unwilling to do.

Once Paul received God's amazing grace and responded to God's call upon his life, he never looked back or put this commitment on hold. During the most severe trials Paul remained faithful, and so must we.

In addition, God will partner with those who lay their lives on the altar to change the world for the better. These are the people God will empower to cast an alternative vision for arranging priorities, utilizing resources, handling problems and resolving conflicts. These are the men and women, boys and girls who will overcome evil with good instead of being overcome by evil. These are the ones who will tip the moral arc of the universe toward justice and peace, as Martin Luther King, Jr. so eloquently reminded his followers.

How do I know this? I am surrounded by people who are "living sacrifices." They are parents, grandparents and great-grandparents who give their all to shape and mold their children into loving and responsible citizens. They are teachers, coaches, mentors, civic leaders

and church volunteers who go above and beyond the call of duty to build healthy communities. They are the compassionate and dedicated individuals who work in our medical clinic upstairs, the Emma Quire Mission Center in Owsley County and with the desperate refugees in Morocco. These good-hearted and generous people are the salt of the earth and light of the world. They are serving as beacons of hope and healing, making the world better for all of us.

Where would we be without them? What can you do to join them? Begin by offering God your life, all you have and are, as a “living sacrifice.”

How can we make a “living sacrifice” kind of commitment to God and maintain it when our cultural values and our Christian values clash, or the dark and rebellious side of our human nature wants to go in another direction? I don’t believe we can without help.

This is why we must rely upon the Holy Spirit through our prayer life and constantly renew our minds through the study of scriptures. Remaining faithful is dependent upon self-discovery and self-denial, two things which require assistance from God and others. Adopting the mind of Christ, who embodied what it meant to be a “living sacrifice,” is a life-long process of saying no to things that are harmful and yes to things which are good.

As we gather around this sacred table, I challenge you to evaluate your level of commitment to God and involvement in God’s work. We know how committed Jesus was. The bread and the cup remind us he was a living sacrifice and a literal sacrifice.

What about you? What does your lifestyle reveal about your level of commitment? Give this prayerful thought as you reflect on what it means to be a “living sacrifice.”