Romans Lesson 20 (2018)

**A LIVING SACRIFICE**

Romans 12:1-8

Key Verse: 12:1

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, 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.”

After this long journey through the first eleven chapters in the book of Romans, we finally reached the final chapters, Chapters 12-16. One of the main distinctions between the first eleven chapters and the last five chapters is that the first part deals primarily with what God has done for us, and the last part deals with our actions in response to God. The first part emphasizes our right relations with God while the last part emphasizes our relations with other people. For example, there’s an emphasis on our relationship with other members of the body of Christ (12:3-21; 14:1-15:3) and to the government (13:1-7). In other words, the first part is more about Christian faith and the second part is more about Christian living, the practical application of our Christian faith.

Verses 1 and 2 of this chapter summarize the essence of Christian living. Look at verse 1. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, 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.” The word “therefore” brings our attention to what Paul has been saying in the first part, especially his magnificent claim in Chapter 8 that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ (8:1) and those who trust in him cannot lose their salvation (8:31-39). In Chapters 9-11, Paul also highlighted his point that the basis of God’s salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is the same, God’s mercy.

So what did Paul mean when he said, “I urge you, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice”? Here, our bodies refer to our whole person, not just our physical bodies. What Paul was trying say is that Christians who have been saved by God’s love and mercy are to love God wholeheartedly. The motive of Christian living is not fear or sense of obligation but our gratitude toward God’s mercy and love. In fact, Christian living is a love affair between God and us. And our life as a living sacrifice involves our whole person, our heart, mind, talent, time, money, and other resources.

In fact, Paul already taught this truth in Romans 6:13 by saying “Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.”

But in verse 1, Paul uses temple terminology, “a living sacrifice.” It means that God wants everything from us, not the leftovers. How many hours are there in a week? 168 hours. Out of 168 hours, we spend 56 hours (33%) sleeping, 40 hours (24%) working, 14 hours (8.3%) commuting, 14 hours (8.3%) eating, 12 hours (7%) watching TV, browsing the internet and talking on the phone, 12 hours (7%) on doing household activities, and 10 hours (6%) reading the bible, praying and worshiping. So it seems that we don’t spend most of our time solely on spiritual purposes. So how can we offer our bodies to God 100%?

Paul said something interesting in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” What Paul meant is that there is no distinction between spiritual and secular. It means that it’s not necessarily what we do that matters. What really matters is our attitude in everything we do before God. Whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we should it all with gratitude, love and joy.

To serve God wholeheartedly does not mean to serve God until we become completely burnt out. Surely, God does not want his loving children to be burnt out, resulting in bitterness and regrets. It’s in fact 100 % voluntary. I agree with what someone said: *“Serving without love is slavery.*” I should admit that serving the Lord requires the endurance of pain. But serving the Lord shouldn’t be always a burden. There is the joy of serving and loving the Lord. If we serve someone we really care and love, we don’t whine or make faces.

Therefore, if we are not happy or thankful about giving ourselves to God, we should examine our motives. *“Am I serving God because of the fear of punishment or a sense of obligation?”* Serving God as a living sacrifice is absolutely voluntary. However, we should never be lazy in remembering God’s mercy and grace in our lives so that we may show our gratitude toward God’s mercy. The true and proper worship of God is not a ritualistic worship but the offering of all aspects of our lives to God with gratitude, joy and love in response to God’s mercy.

Read verse 2. “Do not conform 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.” This verse is very challenging to us. And it’s easy for us to be caught up with the structure of this verse. What I mean is that verse 2 consists of two long sentences. And we are often caught up with the first sentence of this verse, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” And we immediately dive into the first sentence, trying to figure out the meaning of it. Yet, we tend to not pay enough attention to the part of this verse, “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

This sentence raises a very important question for all of us. “*How important is it for us to know what God’s will - his good, pleasing and perfect will is? Can any of us tell what God’s good will is for you?”* I think the answer is very clear. But Paul does not say what it is. Why not? It’s because he already said it, especially in Romans 8:29 by saying “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Paul didn’t say it again also because we need to discover it through our personal “ah-hah” moment with the help of the Holy Spirit over and over again. Our life is full of events- unpredictable events with ups and downs and twists and turns. We are often frustrated, not knowing what God’s will is.

How can we know God’s perfect will for us? Look at verse 2a again. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” According to Paul, knowing God’s good, pleasing and perfect will for us is the byproduct of our spiritual struggle *1) by not conforming to the pattern of this world and 2) being transformed by the renewing of our mind.*

**First, we should not conform to the pattern of this world (2a).** Admit it or not, all of us are the byproducts of our contemporary culture. Although each person is different, most of us follow certain trends, values, rules, and customs of the cultures we live in without questioning them. According to Paul, however, there is a danger in following the pattern of this world blindly. It does not mean that we should be anti-cultural. I think what he meant is that Christians should carefully examine themselves whether they are following worldly values, beliefs and trends at the expense of spiritual values, beliefs and trends. Due to the dominant ungodly cultural trends today, it’s a great challenge for us as Christians not to be ashamed of our faith in Christ. We definitely need spiritual insight and conviction.

Second, we should be transformed by the renewing of our mind (2b). Here, Paul said that instead of conforming to the trends of the world, we should be transformed. What do you mean to be transformed? The word **“transform**” is derived from the Greek word *“****metamorphosis****”* which means *“change of physical form, structure, or substance, especially by supernatural.*  But what Paul refers to here is an inner change rather than an outward change. In fact, we are to struggle to be transformed into the image and character of our Lord Jesus Christ, to be more humble, peaceful, loving, mindful, compassionate, patient, kind and genuine. And such inner transformation is not automatic. This change is not instant, but it takes a life-long process. We tend to blame other people for our problems. It’s often hard to understand why we act in certain ways. By structure, nature and experience, humans are very complex. But before God, we are responsible to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

How can we transformed and not to conform to the pattern of this world? It’s definitely by the work of the Holy Spirit and through the words of truth. Hebrews 4:12-13 states, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joins and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the hearts. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

In the following passages, 12:3-15:13, Paul gives the detailed instructions as to how we can relate to others. Look at verse 3. “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: 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.” Here, it seems that Paul was trying to encourage his readers to be humble before God. But he does not use the word *“humility*” or *“humble.”* I think it’s because the notion of humility is different, depending on the perception of the individual and the culture. To some, being humble means ignoring or lowering one self. But that’s not what real humility is about. So instead of saying “be humble before God” Paul said "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.”

According to Paul, humility is having an authentic self before God. Acknowledging oneself objectively, with his/her strengths and weaknesses, is essential in order to have a solid and healthy self in our Lord Jesus Christ. Unless we have a solid self in Christ, we can live in our pseudo-self, which can be the cause of many individual and relational problems. In order to establish healthy self, we need faith in Jesus Christ. That’s why Paul said at the end, “in accordance with the faith.”

Look at verses 4-8. According to these verses, we learn that our authentic self in Christ is reinforced as we are able to acknowledge ourselves as an essential part of the whole, the body of Christ Jesus. Look at verses 4-5. “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.” Each of us has been given different personalities, temperaments, abilities and experiences. We are equipped to form a body of Christ and to do good works. In other words, each of us finds true meaning and function as a part of the whole body. As chopped-off fingers or cut-off toes we wouldn’t amount to much. The eye cannot say to the hand, *“I don’t need you.”* And the head cannot say to the feet, *“I don’t need you”* or *“I am better than you.”* We should respect one another because we belong to all the others.

In verses 6-9, seven gifts are mentioned. Look at verses 6-9. “We have different gifts, according the grace given to each of us. 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.” Definitely this list is not exhaustive. In fact, other Scriptures mention different gifts besides the ones mentioned here, such as the gifts of healing, miracles, tongue speaking, interpretation and discernment, etc. (1 Cor. 12:8-10, 28 or Eph. 4:11). I also believe that there is the gift of music as well as the gift of carpentry and intentional silence. And there is no hierarchy in the gifts and these gifts are given to serving and edifying the body of Christ.

Let me close the sermon. We have been shown the mercy of God through his son Jesus Christ. In spite of our weakness and shortcomings, we are given one blessing after another in Christ Jesus (Jn.1:16). All our sins are forgiven through the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. We, who are justified by faith in Christ, will not lose our salvation (8:1-2, 31-39). After being sanctified, we will be glorified when Jesus comes again. We are shown mercy so that we can also show God’s mercy to others. However, knowing that the spiritual condition of the world is not getting better but getting worse, we feel powerless.

How can we show the world that God is merciful? In today’s passage, Paul urges us to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, holy and pleasing to God, and this is our true and proper worship to God. He also urges us not to conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of our mind. One of the best ways to show and share God’s mercy is to live as authentic believers in Christ, in whatever we do and wherever we are. We are to offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice not because of fear of punishment or a sense of obligation but because of our gratitude toward God’s mercy. Fundamentally speaking, we must be aware that apart from God’s mercy, we are nothing. And the best thing we can do for God is to embrace his mercy. Whatever we do, we do it in view of God’s mercy.