

A LIVING SACRIFICE **Romans 12:1**

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

This lesson begins the practical section of the Book of Romans which deals with “shoeleather” Christianity, the transferring of doctrine into action. In future lessons some may accuse me of leaving teaching and going to meddling, for these Scriptures become quite convicting. If the shoe fits, wear it!

Paul has shown us that all men are sinners, separated from God and under his wrath (Rom. 1-3), that salvation is by faith in Christ who made a perfect sacrifice for sins (Rom. 4-5), that all who trust Christ will begin to live for him in their experience (Rom. 6-7), and that the true Christian has God working in and for him and never need fear losing his salvation once he has come to Christ (Rom. 8). Paul also showed how God sovereignly hardened Israel so that in grace he might bring gospel opportunity to the Gentiles, shedding his mercy on some for salvation. Sometime in the future God will again deal with Israel and show mercy on them for salvation and the whole nation will be converted (Rom. 9-11).

No matter what theological positions we might hold on salvation (sovereign election or freewill), each of us must agree on these practical exhortations to holy, Christ-centered living found in Romans 12-16.

EXHORTATION ACCORDING TO GOD’S MERCIES — Romans 12:1a

“I beseech you therefore, brethren.” It should be noted that this is speaking to Christians, not unbelievers. God is asking for a decision by those who have already trusted Christ for salvation. He is asking for a presentation of the life to him.

Paul is asking, not commanding, that the Christian make a presentation of his life to God. It is not as though he were pleading, but rather urging or exhorting believers to make this decision. Moreover, presenting themselves to God is not some unimportant, optional thing. Having received God’s free and gracious salvation, it is the believer’s responsibility to live a righteous life, a voluntary obligation. (This would be like a patriot who is drafted into the military service by his government. He must go, but he wants to go because he loves his country.)

“By the mercies of God.” This points back to Romans 11 where Paul made it clear that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by God’s mercy alone, for no human being deserves salvation (Rom. 11:30-32). God’s mercy is related to his plan, and he does have a perfect plan for this world. Furthermore, we cannot present our bodies to God unless he grants us mercy to do so. No

creature can comprehend God's working (11:34) or give him advice (11:35), for he does as he pleases in heaven and earth. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things and everything that happens is working according to his plan and for his glory (11:36). If we have not presented our bodies to him, perhaps we do not comprehend God's mercy.

The marvelous hymn of praise and worship in Romans 11 about the greatness of God is more than an expression of the awe and wonder of the Apostle's heart at the majesty of God. It is primarily an expression of the utter madness of trying to live apart from complete divine control. Paul is stating the fact that God stands at the beginning and end of every path of man, and that there is no escaping him anywhere.

For better or worse, the Christian is in God's hands; God is never in the Christians' hands. In view of this Paul is saying that the most logical, the most sensible, the most natural thing in the world is to present your body to him as a living sacrifice. How foolish it is to try to live a life apart from the God of heaven and earth!

EXPLANATION OF HOW TO LIVE UNDER GOD'S CONTROL — Romans 12:1b

Whenever I teach on Christian commitment to God, I do so with fear and trepidation, for everybody is hammering at Christians to commit themselves to God, but there is little teaching on how to commit to God. Consequently, many Christians are worked up to an emotional frenzy over commitment, but really do not know how. To begin, we should state the two basic philosophies of life. The world says, "My life is my own to live as I please." The philosophy of the Christian is, "My life is God's to do with as he wills." These philosophies are diametrically opposed. They can never be compatible.

"That ye present your bodies." Paul draws an analogy between Old Testament ritual sacrifices of animals and New Testament spiritual sacrifices, which includes the presentation of the life to God. Christians are told in Hebrews 13 that they are to offer up the spiritual sacrifices of praise, money, and good works. We Christians are to offer praise, purse, performance, our whole person, to God. These are the sacrifices with which God is well pleased.

The word "present" is an active word and involves the human will. It is not a passive yielding, but an active presentation of the life to God. It is voluntarily placing one's life into God's hands, totally and unreservedly. It is not sitting around in a mystical trance waiting for God to move. It is an act of obedience that springs from the human will.

The word "present" could also be translated "once and for all present." Thus, the Christian must come to a place in his life (a crisis) where he sees the folly of living only for himself and places himself in God's hands to let God's life be lived in him. "Present" here could also look at one's whole life as a presentation, beginning with an initial commitment to do God's will.

Have you ever made such a commitment to God? “Father, I am yours. You have redeemed me from sin by your grace through Christ. I now commit my life to you unreservedly, for I want your will more than anything else. Here is my whole body; do with it as you see fit.”

Presenting the life, once for all, is like the marriage vows. To my wife I gave a once-and-for-all initial consent by saying, “I do.” But upon that initial “I do,” many decisions have been based. In fact, very few decisions are made without considering my responsibility to my wife and family. One initial commitment to Christ involves literally thousands of decisions based on the initial commitment.

Notice Paul says present your “bodies.” Why did he say “bodies” instead of “life,” or “spirit” or “soul”? When a person finally gets around to making his body available to something, he has given his whole person to that cause.

I frequently hear, as all pastors do, somebody say to me, “Well, I am sorry I can’t make it to the meeting tonight, but I will be with you in spirit.” I understand what they mean, but I find it rather disconcerting to speak to a hall full of spirits. I would so much rather they bring their bodies. If you move your body into action, you have really given yourself, and you can come short of it in a thousand different ways and sound very pious in doing so, but when you finally put your body on the line, that is really when you have given yourself.

When the body is committed, we guard what our eyes see, our ears hear, what our tongues say, where our hands roam, and where our feet walk. We are conscious that our bodies belong to God.

I remember the story of a young Christian man who was going with a girl in high school who was anything but respectable. He breathed a sigh of relief when he went away into the army for a few years. The girl drifted around with other fellows, but the boy met a fine Christian girl and married her. During this time the boy was growing in grace and had presented his body to God for a living sacrifice. When he got out of the army, he and his wife came back to live in his home town. One evening when his wife was away, his old flame came over to his house. She made no attempt to hide her affection for him and moved in such a voluptuous way that he realized he had but to reach out his hand and she was his. Of course, he had the feelings that go with natural male desire, but he kept repeating to himself that his body was a living sacrifice for God’s use only. In order to avoid the girl’s obvious advances, he talked about his wife and showed the girl pictures of his real love. When the old flame saw he was not interested, she said to him on her way out, “She must be quite a girl if she can keep you from reaching.” Little did she know it was not just his wife but also God who kept him from reaching, for he had presented himself a living sacrifice.

“A living sacrifice.” Our English connotation for a “sacrifice” is voluntarily giving up something we have a right to keep. This concept is foreign to Old Testament sacrifices, for when a Jew brought a sacrifice to God, he was voluntarily giving back to God that which was rightfully

God's all along. The Jew knew he had no right to the sacrifice; it was God's property. When a Christian presents his life to God, it is not as though he were making a big sacrifice as we think of the word. He is simply presenting to God what is actually already God's:

“What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

There is no room for' boasting or pride. I cringe when I hear testimonies as to how someone gave up riches or fame or love for Christ's sake, and they assume an attitude of “how lucky God must be to know I'm on his side.” The Christian's life belongs to God already, and God has a right to use it as he sees fit.

Notice that we are to be a living sacrifice, not a dead one. God calls very few of his saints to martyrdom. He calls the average Christian to live for him. It may be easier for a man to work himself up under the stimulus of emotion and circumstances to make the supreme sacrifice of a martyr than to live a daily routine, and perhaps humdrum, existence for God. It is much harder to live for Christ than to die for him.

The commitment of the life to God is like getting into a swimming pool for the first time. Not everyone gets in with the same enthusiasm. There is always the brave soul who without a moment's hesitation jumps right in, leaving the great majority standing on the side watching. There are some Christians who commit themselves to Christ almost immediately after conversion, and they often have a hard time understanding others who are hesitant about making that commitment. There are others who, after some hesitation and with some coaching and persuasion, jump in. Some Christians need persuasion and instruction in God's Word before they will make this commitment. Then there is the shy swimmer who just hates the idea of getting into the water all at once. He puts his toe in the water, then sits on the side of the pool dangling his feet in. Finally he is brave enough to jump into the shallow part up to his hips and splash water on his shoulders and face. Then he dips in up to his neck and after a long period puts his head and whole body under the water. This third person can drive others wild because it seems as if he will never get wet all over and swim. Some Christians are in this last category. They make their commitment very slowly, a little bit at a time. They bring great frustration to those who are already committed, but ultimately they do commit.

“Holy, acceptable unto God.” The Christian's sacrifice unto God is to set himself apart to God and to have a life of ethical and moral holiness. All Old Testament sacrifices were set apart to God and were to be free of blemishes and defects.

This simply means that true commitment rests on an awareness that the only life pleasing to God is that of Jesus Christ living in the Christian. We set aside our plans, our programs, our

ideals, our desires, for his plans, his programs, and his ideals and desires. This is all done through the consciousness of the human will. God will not be satisfied until he has all the Christian.

“Which is your reasonable service.” This should be translated, “Which is your spiritual worship.” True worship is related to the presentation and commitment of the life to God. It is a satisfying thing. Man was made to worship God, and when he does he has a sense of fulfillment and joy beyond anything the world knows.

Christian worship is not confined to those moments on Sunday morning when one gathers with others at church — that is just our corporate worship. We worship God all day long and any and everything we do to glorify him is true worship. When a housewife does the dishes and cleans the house, or a mother changes the baby’s diapers, or a father finds time to spend with his children, or a businessman does his work for the glory of God, true worship has taken place. Worship is being occupied with Christ in everything and doing all things for the glory of God.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse tells the story of how he and his wife were in the car hurrying to a particular meeting. He pushed down the accelerator and the car whizzed down the highway far faster than the speed limit. In a quiet way Mrs. Barnhouse asked him, “Are you worshipping God by speeding?”

Dr. Barnhouse didn’t quite understand. “What do you mean?” he said.

“The Bible says we are to obey our government, which includes the speed laws of the state, and it says your body is to be presented to God which is your spiritual worship, but your foot apparently isn’t, for it isn’t keeping the speed laws.”

Immediately Dr. Barnhouse saw the point. He could not worship God and break the speed laws too. If his body were a living sacrifice, his foot would have kept the laws of the state.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have learned that the only life that is really worth living is a life that is utterly abandoned to God, a life in which God is in control, and a life in which God rules and reigns. You may think that you can’t make this presentation. It is too hard; it would involve too many changes. Yet God said that this commitment must be made if the Christian is to enjoy God forever.

Actually, the one reason many Christians never make this commitment is because of fear. They fear, almost like a superstition, that if they surrender themselves fully to God something tragic will happen or God will make impossible demands on them.

I have a son David whom I love dearly. (I love all my sons, but must choose one for the illustration!) Suppose some night when I came home he were to put his arm around me and say, “Dad, I love you and I have been thinking about how I can demonstrate my love for you. I have decided that I will do anything you want me to do.”

What do you think would be my response? “David, I have been waiting for this moment. Now that you have relinquished your will to mine, I am going to lock you in your room, take away your privileges and make you do all the things you dislike doing. In addition to this, you will have to eat spinach three times a day. You will regret the day you were born. You will be sorry that you told me you loved me and want to please me by doing what I want you to do. I will make you the most miserable kid in town!” Would I say this? How ridiculous! I would try to demonstrate my love for him in an even greater way than before. Among other things I would probably buy him a basketball and a baseball glove! So it is with our heavenly Father. He is ready to bless and enrich us the moment we yield our will, our life, our body, to him. We should only fear if we are not committed Christians!

If you do not know Christ, your first responsibility before God is to receive him as Lord and Saviour of your life. You cannot even begin to know God until Christ has come into your life, Jesus promised that anyone who comes to him would receive forgiveness of sins, eternal life and that he would never be cast out. Do you know Christ?