

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

Dr. George O. Wood

Romans 12:1-2 (NIV)

“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—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

With Romans 12, we begin the practical division of the epistle of Paul to the Romans. We have looked at Romans 1 through 11, which is the doctrinal section. And the theme of Romans is stated in Romans 1:17: “The just shall live by faith.” In looking at Romans 1 through 11, we emphasized the theme, “the just” and “by faith.” But now, as we come to this section of the Book of Romans, we would underline the words “shall live.”

It’s interesting to realize that Paul does not rush into the practical application of the Christian life until a doctrinal framework has been built, which would suggest to us how we come into relationship with God and how it is that we receive His favor. We receive it through Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul is operating on the assumption that we believe first, and then we behave.

Revelation of God’s will is first. Then comes our responsibility.

This approach sort of flies in the face of trends today. You see it in Christian literature, and the like, which emphasizes the practical dimension of Christian living: “How to Lose Fat for the Lord.” A myriad of practical topics present themselves. If you look at what is selling in the Christian field of literature, you will find that, by and large, what really sells is what is geared toward the practical application of Christianity toward everyday life—money management, how to have a better family life, how to get along better with your past and relate to other persons. It’s an age of practicality.

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

I was amused a week or two ago when I got my current issue of “Eternity” magazine and read one of my favorite columnists. He’s always spoofing something in his column, “Out of My Mind.” He does a hypothetical situation of, “What if one of the publishers of practical books had gone to some of the writers of the past?” He creates scenes like coming to John Bunyan, who is in jail. “John Bunyan, we’ve got a contract for you. We’d like you to write a book.” And Bunyan says, “I’m writing an allegory of the Christian life which talks about the pilgrim’s progress.” And the editor says to him, “That will never sell! What will sell is if you write about your prison experience and who you’re leading to Christ in prison.”

The editor comes to Harriet Beecher Stowe and asks her, “What are you writing about?” She says, “I’m writing about slavery and how Christians should be against it. It’s going to be called *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” The editor says, “That will never sell. It’s too sensitive a topic. Write a practical book for women. Maybe something like *Free Verse From the Pastor’s Wife*. (‘As I churned my butter this morning, there You were, Lord.’)”

Or David Brainerd, the great missionary to the American Indians, who at an early age, gave his life for the gospel. “David Brainerd, you’re thinking about writing a journal? Who’s interested in reading a journal these days? You’ve been out here in the wilderness. You’d make an excellent author for *The Christian’s Survival Guide: How to Live on Berries, How to Make a Lean-To, How to Fish and Trap*.”

I think the most interesting one was on Martin Luther. He creates the scene of the editor coming to Martin Luther. “I’m acquisitions editor. You’ve created quite a stir lately, you know that. We’d like to sign you up to write a book, with a sizable advance, of course. What are you interested in writing? You’re working on a commentary on the Book of Romans? How interesting. But before you hit the market with such a ponderous work, forgive me, but perhaps

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

something more popular would find greater acceptance. And it might open the door later to Romans. Let's say, *Jogging with Jesus*. How's that?"

With all that swipe at practicality, what he's trying to tell you is, first—before Paul gets in practicality—he's talking about how our faith is rooted in eternity. And the emphasis on practicality is covered by this condition: "I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God" (Romans 12:1). Every admonition we are asked to practice as a Christian proceeds out of God's mercy. So in this letter, Paul has started out by saying, "All of us have fallen short of the glory of God. All of us have been apart from Him. All of us have stood in need of His mercy. And through the Cross, Christ has given His life as an acceptable sacrifice to God on our behalf. And having been given life, and given a renewing of the body which is finally culminated in the Resurrection. Having now the power of the Spirit resident in us. And realizing through Romans 9, 10, and 11 that whatever God starts, He is going to finish. Realizing all of this by the mercies of God, we come to the practical dimensions of the letter.

We're learning, as we get into the practical side of the gospel, that we do not work *for* our salvation. We work *from* our salvation. And it is so easy, as believers, to fall into the trap of trying again to earn God's favor on the basis of being a good Christian. We have already won God's favor through Christ. That is over and done with. Now we're coming to God, not to earn His favor or work for salvation, but as a practical way to express thanksgiving to Him for what He has done. All of our life, if you will, is really a hymn of praise to God and an attempt therefore to say, "Thanks for what You have done for us."

In these two verses this morning, Paul basically presents two admonitions. The first: "Present your bodies." The second: "Let your mind be transformed."

I. Present your bodies.

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

I have a card for a health spa which entitles me to use it. There's all kinds of privileges with this card. But I can carry this card around all the time (which I do) and have all the privileges which accrue to this card. But it is worthless unless I present my body. Jack Lalanne does not get on television and say, "I want your spirit!" In regards to anything relating to physical exercise, whatever our intentions are, they are no good unless we make our body available.

The same is true for our spiritual behavior and practically any discipline in the spiritual life. It is making our bodies available. Everything we do as human beings involves our bodies. You cannot send your spirit to school. You cannot send your spirit to work today. The wives who stay at home can't say: "I think my spirit will do the vacuum cleaning and the dishes and cook the meals today." Try doing it without your body. It can't be done. I can't do anything apart from my body. I and my body are one. I can't even talk to someone without my body. Did you ever try to greet anyone on the phone without using your body? Try it sometime. Or just talking like we are right now. I have to use my body. If I'm going to serve the Lord within the church or serve the Lord at all, it must involve my body. When the alarm clock rang this morning, I couldn't say, "It would be nice to sleep another couple hours. I think I'll send my spirit to preach this morning." You cannot send your spirit to a prayer meeting. You cannot send your spirit to teach a Sunday School class, to sing in the choir, to witness to a neighbor—to do anything in the work of God. We find in the story of the Good Samaritan, it was the man who committed his body that got the work done. He committed his hands because he had committed his eyes. And he committed his feet. He walked over to where the wounded man was, picked him up, and took him to a place. The man would have never been helped if the Good Samaritan had not committed his body. So, therefore, the admonition that Paul brings is, first of all, present your bodies. That was quite a different way of looking at life than the Greek or contemporaries to Paul, who held that the body was something in which the spirit was imprisoned. Therefore, you could do one of two things:

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

either ignore it and do whatever you wanted, or beat it into subjection. There's a high regard in the gospel for the human body, and recognition that if you're really going to serve God, you do so in the body. Salvation embraces my body. When I give my life to Christ—if you give your life to the Lord in a service like this, it embraces your body. We had a beautiful experience in the second service last Sunday morning where some people responded to the Lord and came forward and received Christ as Savior. To do that embraced their body. They did not send their spirit forward. They came forward and, in an act of faith, received Christ. They confessed with their mouth and believed in their heart.

I think this is a beautiful symbolism of baptism. When you're baptized, what the Lord is saying is, "I want you to see it's not only your spirit that's believed in Me, but all of you now is being submerged into this water." And your body is experiencing the fact that you've truly been placed into Christ. What is happening to you at baptism is a sign, a symbol of what is to happen to you in the age to come. Your body is going to be resurrected. You and your body are together in this thing, and God is going to see to it that you get a whole brand new one, glorious and made like Christ. Everything that we do as human beings is linked to what God has done in making us with bodies. Therefore, we're to present them.

A. And Paul tells us how we're to present our bodies. We're to present our bodies, first of all, as a living sacrifice. I don't know what the word "sacrifice" connotes to you. I think it generally has the meaning that when you hear the word sacrifice, you get a grimace on your face and say, "The Lord's going to make me do that!" Like the story of the pig and the hen that were on their way to the diner where there was a special on—ham and eggs for 79 cents. The pig said to the hen, "For you, that's an offering. But for me, it's a real sacrifice." We get that feeling. Yet when we see the Lord calling us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice and get a hold of where Paul's been in this letter and where he's going, it is a tremendous thing to realize.

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

First of all, we have to think back to the Old Testament, to the idea that's involved in sacrifice. In the Old Testament, there were basically two kinds of sacrifices. There were five sacrifices in all, but basically they fell into two spheres.

One kind of sacrifice was related to the theme of reconciliation with God. It was offered because sin had been committed. These were called the sin and the trespass offerings.

But there was another kind of offering, which was given not for reconciliation with God as much as it was given to express consecration to God and thanksgiving to God. These were the peace offerings and the whole burnt offerings.

The whole thrust of Paul's first eleven chapters in the Book of Romans is to say the first division of sacrifices, in regard to reconciliation with God, have been met in the sacrifice that Christ has made. Christ is the atonement for sin. He makes us at one with God. Romans 3, especially, laid that out very clearly—that Jesus, through His death, became the propitiation for our sins. He satisfied the demand for God's justice and allowed God to both judge sin and be gracious to the sinner. So the sacrifice for reconciliation has already been met.

Therefore, the only kind of sacrifice that is open for us is the sacrifice that involves consecration and thanksgiving. It is not a sacrifice for sin. That has been met. And in the Old Testament, for the individual, the burnt offerings and the peace offerings were optional. They were voluntary.

Not so the sin and the trespass. When you sinned and when you trespassed, if you were going to have that sin taken care of, you had to offer the offerings. But with the burnt offerings and with the peace offerings, you offered them when your heart was moved to respond to God. It's something that when you offered the offering—whenever an offering was offered to God—it became God's. We could get somewhat technical here and go on to say that in the offerings in the Old Testament offered to God, especially the peace offering, part of the offering was then given back to the person that offered it. After it had been consecrated. This is God returning life

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

to sustain us. But what we do in offering our body as a living sacrifice is not from a sense of compulsion, but a voluntary response to God. It is a giving of ourselves—not that we might satisfy God and please Him more than He's ever been pleased. We can never please God more than Jesus pleased Him. We're not talking about earning any favor with God. We're coming and offering our bodies as a sacrifice in an effort to say thanks to the Lord. Paul says this sacrifice is to be a living sacrifice.

We look at the Old Testament and see the thousands of offerings over the hundreds and hundreds of years. You recognize that every animal that went up to be sacrificed died. Not a one walked away from the sacrificial table free. Its life was offered. But once Christ's life has been offered for us, whenever we come to the point of sacrifice, we find that whoever comes to sacrifice his life for the Lord walks away not dead, but really alive. This is the point I think that Paul is driving at. When you give your life—your body—to the Lord, you really have the chance to live. Everything else in this world is headed for death. The only people who are headed for life are the people who have accepted the sacrifice of Christ. So you have the chance—and presenting your body is part of it—to express the fact that you're headed for life. A living sacrifice. So present your body a living sacrifice.

We find that when we come to know the Lord and follow His orders for our life, it is what is good for us. And we learn to enjoy the presence of the Lord. My body has this peculiar ability to anticipate things that I really like. It's not hard for my body to be present in certain moments. I think the same thing comes in regard to the will of the Lord and in regard to being a part of the body of Christ. That when we are serving the Lord from a right kind of spirit, it's not hard for our body to want to be present, to do the thing that God has called us to do.

I do recognize that not everything our body does is from the sheer sense of enjoyment. If it were, probably you'd want to stay in bed fourteen to sixteen hours a day, if you're that kind of a

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

person. I like to sleep. You have to regulate your body and realize that it's not just simply doing everything because you enjoy it. There's a maturity, a refinement, that comes in your development. But presenting your life as a body, as a living sacrifice, is one that will bring you fulfillment. Sacrifice is life being released to God. In the Old Testament, the life was released to God when the animal was slain. But now life is released to God when you are offering yourself to Him. Paul says present your body as a living sacrifice.

B. He also says present in holiness. When you present your body holy to the Lord, it means whatever is holy is set apart for God. It is sanctified. It is no longer your property. It's God's. It's reserved for His usage. This means in presenting our bodies, we begin to think of the pursuits our bodies engage in. How do we present our bodies holy? My body can go to persons. My body can go to places. My body can go to activities. Intaking by seeing, hearing, eating and drinking, and touching. Outtaking by looking, speaking, walking, feeling. To whom does my body go? Where does my body go? What does my body do? In all three of these places, the Lord is asking me to present my body holy. So it is not going to any person in any way that is not approved by Him. It is not going to any place that is in any way not approved by Him. And it is not going to any activity which, in any way, is not approved by Him. The body is His. The body is the Lord's. It is seeking with the whole heart to do His will and to be holy, reserved for His use.

C. And therefore, Paul says the third way we present our body is that it is acceptable to God. In the Old Testament what made a sacrifice acceptable was it was without blemish. It was perfect. Most generally, it was a mature animal. Leviticus 1:17, speaking of a burnt offering, which was an offering of consecration to the Lord, said that the offering was a pleasing odor to the Lord. I don't think that God so much enjoyed smelling burning flesh. That's not the way God looked at the burnt offering. What would a burnt offering mean, being pleasing to God? God looked at the spirit of the person who was offering that which was going up. He looked at it and said, "That's

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

pleasing to Me, that love that is represented there. That obedience that is represented there. The fellowship that is now possible between Me and that person. The forgiveness that is there.”

Christ, when He was offered up, Ephesians 5 calls Him a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God. God was pleased with His act. So present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God. This is your reasonable worship, or your spiritual worship or reasonable service.

The word translated “spiritual” here in verse 1 is in contrast to the irrationality of animals, which cannot make logical kinds of action. The root word carries the idea of logical, and it is sometimes translated as “rational” rather than simply “spiritual.” The word “worship” is serving God. What Paul is really saying is worship, serving God, is going on all the time. Wherever we present our bodies, there we’re worshipping God—whether we present our bodies in the home or on the job or at school. Wherever we are, we are worshipping God, so that worship is not an hour-a-week sort of a thing. It is an every moment activity, and it’s reasonable. It’s logical.

When we consider what Christ has done, it is the only thing we can do. Present your bodies, Paul says.

The second in verse 2: “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Here he comes at the inward life, having talked about what we do with our bodies, ourselves.

II. Be transformed.

A. He introduces it with a negative. “Do not be conformed to this age [or to this world].” As our kids have gone back to school this week, I realize again the deep concerns I have for them as they go back to a secular situation. I’m concerned for them because I realize that this age, or this world, has certain kinds of outlooks which are totally alien to that which the Scriptures are speaking of and Christ represents. I’m concerned about their mental outlook on life. For the fashion of this age is to look at life mentally from the standpoint that there is no ultimate reality or truth. There is no beginning, where God created, and, therefore, can be no ending, no

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

wrapping up, where God controls—a secular way of looking at life. Paul is saying, “Do not be conformed to this age in its mental way of looking at life. You are people who have had the revelation from God in Jesus Christ.” Don’t be conformed to the morals of this age, the morals which suggest—by our alcoholism rates, by our marital disruption rates, by our juvenile delinquency rates, by our drug rate, and the like—that this world has a pattern of relating in the ways noted in the magazines of our age. Everywhere from the skin flicks to legitimate magazines, which project a sort of attitude of, “Anything goes as long as no one else is hurt.”

Morals. Do not be conformed to this age.

Even as the kids go back to school, I’m concerned about manners, ways of acting, ways of relating to people, all of these things. The Christian looks at this age and filters what is in this age that is not of God and, therefore, seeks not to be conformed to it.

It’s interesting that Paul, in saying, “do not be conformed to this age,” then “be transformed” is using two different words for “conformed” and “transformed.” The word that he uses for “conformed” is the word from which we derive the word “scheme.” And the word for which he uses “transformed” is the word “morph.” The basic difference between these two words are as follows. I am male. I will never be female. My morph is male. But my schema is changing. I am not the way I looked when I was 17. I have to remind myself once in a while to remember that my schema is changing. And if the Lord gives me life and He tarries, when I am seventy I will not look like I am now. That is undergoing alteration. The Scripture says that what is of this world is passing away. The word for “schema” conveys the idea of something that is changing. It is fashion. Anyone who looks at the scene of fashion realizes how much change goes on, even in men’s hair. What Paul is saying is when you look at what’s popular with the world and you judge it against the gospel, if what is popular with the world at is at odds with what is revealed

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

here then don't allow yourself to be pressed into that image. As Phillips says in his translation, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." On the negative side—don't be conformed.

B. But on the positive side, "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Undergo a deep, radical change. And this deep, radical change of your nature occurs by renewing your mind in service to God. It's not just something which just touches the emotions. It is one which touches your outlook and your way of thinking. How do you undergo this renewal of mind? The rest of Romans 12 is all about this.

We're going to take some time to go through Romans 12, almost verse-by-verse. We may not get out of Romans 12 till the end of the year. But this is so basic a way of looking at life. One by one, the admonitions are given on how we are to relate to God and how we're to relate to people and how we're to relate to ourselves. What Paul is really implicitly saying here that one does not press a button and make an instant, mature Christian. Wouldn't it be nice if we could come to the Lord and say, "I'm new in the kingdom of God, and I would like to be instantly mature. Is there a button I could press in prayer or hands that could be laid upon me or some magic formula I can get a hold of that will instantly help me in every way to have my mind renewed?" Granted, the Lord allows accelerated growth to everyone who is hungry and thirsty, but what the apostle is saying is that in our Christian life we are involved in growth—and it is a time-consuming process, and it is one that keeps going and going.

In the process of renewing your mind, you will discover the will of God. Not the will of God in terms of some far-out thing that God wants you to do or some place He wants you to go. For the will of God is near you. It relates to your behavior. It relates to your thought life. You will discover, as your mind is renewed, that the will of God is good. It is perfect. It is acceptable. This does not mean that God has three wills that are acceptable to Him. I've heard it taught. Maybe you have, too—the perfect will of God, and the acceptable, or permissive, will of God. I

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

fail to find that in the Scripture. These three words—good, perfect, and acceptable—are all three adjectives which modify the statement of “the will of God.” The will of God, when you find it, is always is good. It’s always acceptable. It’s always perfect. So be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Paul has a beautiful statement which parallels this in Corinthians, where he states that as we behold the face of Christ we are being changed, transformed from glory into glory. This comes in a section of Corinthians where Paul is talking about Moses, where he had a veil over his face to keep people from seeing the glory that was there. Paul lets us in on the real secret as to why Moses kept a veil on his face for so long. The real reason was because the glory started ebbing away, and he didn’t want anybody to know that his glory was slipping. So he kept the veil on. We would call him a person with a mask. Paul says when you become a Christian you don’t have to keep a veil on your face any more. You don’t have to wear a facade. You’re now looking at Christ, and you’re being changed from glory into glory. This means that we can really let ourselves be exposed for the people that we are. And we are becoming like Christ.

I was meditating on that as I was driving to the family Bible camp. The children were in the backseat. All of a sudden, I get to thinking about that verse and the kids, how excited they are to get to summer camp. I’m thinking of the first time they came to camp and how precious they were then, and they’re so much more precious now because I’ve had a chance to live with them longer.

Then I thought of this Scripture, “Being changed from glory into glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). How the Father must look at us and say, “You were beautiful when you first came to Me. But you’re more beautiful now. You’re being transformed.” As you get the mind of Christ, as you know what is His will, your radiance and your countenance and the way you’re looking at life is

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

becoming more and more acceptable to Him. All this is involved in this beautiful theme of presenting your body and transforming your mind.

We come to a Scripture like this, and it is a call to commitment. We realize that there are two basic contrasting attitudes toward life. You can say, “My life is my own, to live it as I please.” Or you can say, “My life is God’s to do with as He wills.” If you can say, “My life is God’s to do with as He will,” you’ve come into the spirit of Romans 12:1-2.

One more word to tie together the first eleven chapters with these two verses. We begin on the practical section of living the Christian life. I would love to be an artist. I admire people who have the ability to draw. I can’t draw a straight line without a ruler. My artwork is on a first-grade level. I try to compensate for that by, from time to time, putting together a picture puzzle and laminating it or something. That’s my art piece. I used to get these paint-by-number and think I could be an artist. But alas! I’m stuck. The only way I could be an artist is if, somehow, an artist could get inside me and help me see the way they see and draw the way they draw. That’s impossible on the physical scale.

But that’s precisely the point when we come to the New Testament and living the Christian life. You look at the Christian life and what is called for. It is a life of beauty. It is a life of adjustment. It is a life which is called holy. But I think of even a better word than “holy” which adequately describes it is “healthy.” It is healthy. It is a treasure. And if you look at it from the standpoint of not being a believer, it is impossible to live. Even as a believer, there are moments when you say, “I drew some really bad lines there. The picture is really out of kilter.” It’s impossible to live unless the artist of the Christian life gets inside.

This is precisely what happens when we come to Christ and invite Him in. He does get inside our life. It happens whenever we call upon the Holy Spirit from the deep sincerity of our heart, from the attitude of hunger and thirst, and ask Him to inhabit us. He becomes, then, that motivating

A CALL TO COMMITMENT

Romans 12:1-2

force within us which helps us to live the life. It's His life working in us which makes it possible for our body to be the temple of the Holy Spirit and for it to exist with God's glory. It's Him being inside me which makes it possible for me to begin thinking like Christ.

Let me exhort you to present your bodies, as Paul says. To have your mind renewed. But to not try it all until Christ has been invited into your life. When He's there, then begin making your body available and begin letting your mind be transformed by what He is asking you to do.

Closing Prayer

As we conclude our time of worship today, our heavenly Father, we give You thanks for the experience which we have shared this morning. We were invited into this sanctuary with the words of the prophet, "Come, everyone who is thirsty for water" (see Isaiah 55:1). We were invited with Your words that to the thirsty, You would give drink. And we have been blessed of You by hearing of Your work elsewhere. We've been blessed again as we've felt Your words speak to us. In this moment, Lord, when we pray, we do make a concentration of our hearts to You. I ask that by Your Spirit, you'd be present in each one of our lives so that if there are any areas in our experience where we have not really made our body available to You, to do a work which You've called us to do, that this day would be a day of change and renewal and that we would begin presenting our bodies, living, acceptable, holy. That You would cause us, in our relationships to one another, to have a mind that is like Yours—treating one another as sons and daughters of the king. Rejoicing in the life which You've called us to through Christ our Lord. Amen.