

"A Living Sacrifice"

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service"— (Romans 12: 1).

We have just read together Romans 12. We would like to consider the first eight verses. This is a chapter that is very familiar to us, but should be much more familiar than it is. Like many other chapters of the Bible, it contains the simple but profound way of life—the only way of life—the simple choice between eternal joy and eternal oblivion.

It is so easy to be in the Truth all our lives and never really know what it's all about; to continue to the end a creature of the flesh, never to face up to the simple but vital call to total devotion and total service—the only possible way of life.

Paul begins: *"I beseech you. . ."*

Let us not be misled by the gentle tone of entreaty and persuasion. The commandments of God take many forms, but they all are, none the less, life and death commandments. The entreaty is not to soften the command or lessen its seriousness, but to intensify it — to give it incentive, and motive, and power.

"I beseech you, therefore. . ."

The *"therefore"* points us back to what he has just said. The first eleven chapters of Romans lay out God's marvellous purpose of redeeming a few of the wise out of mankind and finally cleansing the world from the corruption of sorrow and sin. It concluded with the 2500-year tragedy of Israel, because they could not or would not perceive this simple way of life laid out before them.

The nation will at last be purified and saved, but how many millions of individuals in it have of their own free choice unnecessarily perished?

"By the mercies of God. . .", he continues.

The mercies of God are in the aggregate the great plan of redemption that His love and wisdom has devised for fallen man, manifested in the life and death of His beloved son. What a tremendous manifestation of mercy and love it is! But how few — how pitifully few — are going in return to do their tiny little bit that is asked to show their reciprocation of that love. And what is the comparatively insignificant response that is asked? So small in comparison that we would be ashamed to even offer it, if it were not for confidence in the compassion and love and understanding of God.

"That ye present your bodies a living sacrifice" — that's all he asks — *"holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."*

To do any less—to even want to do any less—to be satisfied with doing any less, is to manifest that we are made of wood, like all the rest of the dead, wooden world around us that are not living creatures at all in any true, meaningful sense.

"Present your bodies."

That is all we have to give. Our bodies are important. Care of the body is important — a part of our divine service, like care of the valuable machine of an employer entrusted to us for his due. Abuse or neglect of the body in any way is criminal. It is the property of God, held in trust. Misuse of it is criminal, that is, for purposes other than the purpose of God.

Of course, when God's wisdom requires it, the body must be sacrificed clearly to abuse and destruction, as in the cases of Christ and of Paul and many other faithful. But any corruption or pollution or personal abuse or misuse or indulgence of the body is unfaithful stewardship and service to the flesh.

"A living sacrifice"

— the language Paul has used is from the beautiful law of Moses, and we can learn much from that law of what God requires of us. Israel never did learn the lessons and teachings of their law. They just went through the motions, and how dreadfully, tragically easy it is today to do that.

The sacrifices of the law had to be, first, the very best. They had to be without blemish. They had to be what God designated as a clean animal, of certain required characteristics. The principal one was that they must chew the cud. They *must* chew the cud. They must represent those that feed deeply upon the Word, and then ruminates and meditates continually upon it.

The sacrifices must be offered with oil, that is, with enlightenment, understandingly; and with wine — joy and gladness — not a burden; and with salt, cured with sobriety, and speech that is always sound and grave. The life's blood had to be totally poured out unto God upon and under the Christ altar.

It was all God's, for His purpose exclusively, and that vital fact had to be clearly recognized. And the fat was all God's. The fat stood for that which was precious and best — the richness. No Israelite could ever eat fat upon the pain of death. That is self-indulgence, appropriating to our own use and pleasure that which is God's alone.

"Present your body a living sacrifice"

— a living sacrifice. The shadowy sacrifices of the law were necessarily dead. In fact the very word translated “*sacrifice*”, both in the Old Testament and in the New, means literally a slaying, a putting to death. So here we are told there must be a living putting to death of the flesh, of all that is natural and animal.

Paul goes on to say that it must be holy, a holy sacrifice. Holiness is purity, and dedication, and separation — a total setting apart for a divine purpose.

In the Scriptures a very dark line is drawn between that which is holy and that which is profane. It is death to mix them. We cannot be part one and part the other. Once we have made the choice of holiness and life, the natural and the profane must be totally put away. This body is dedicated to holiness.

If any do not want holiness, do not desire to strive for the beauty of holiness, far better they depart from the body. If they want to fulfil the various corruptions of the world (putting off one husband, putting on another — all those various things) better they don't trouble and grieve the body.

He further says it must be “*acceptable to God.*” It is very possible to offer a service that is not acceptable to God, even though it be very devoted and energetic. To be acceptable to God, it must be just what He requires, and in the manner and spirit that He requires. And it must not be marred with aspects and characteristics in our life that are out of harmony with what He requires. For this, constant study of the Word and prayer for guidance are necessary.

"Which is," Paul continues, *"which is your reasonable service."*

There have been many attempts to translate this word differently. But after all the efforts, “*reasonable*” seems to express it best—according to reason. A total, holy, living sacrifice is our reasonable service—our logical, sensible, intelligent service. In the light of two things: what God and Christ have done for us, and what God and Christ have promised to us, anything short of a holy, total, full time service is not only unreasonable, it is blind, stupid, suicidal.

If we really want to be part of this glorious eternal divine enterprise, then all the toys and the games and the rubbish and the foolishness must go. They're all fine for babies. But we must grow up to be useful and sensible adults. And we'll never, never grow up spiritually, if we're in the Truth a million

years, unless we give our total hearts, and minds, and energies to the word and the service of God. This is what loving God with all the heart and all the mind and all the strength and all the life really means. Scriptural love is not just a mere emotion. It is a total way of life and service.

Loving God is infinitely more than just having a pleasant feeling about His goodness to us, as we go about our fleshly pursuits. Salving the conscience by occasionally expressing appropriate things like speaking of His handiwork and so on. It's far more than that.

Verse 2 "*And be not conformed to this world.*"

In what way shall we be not conformed to this world? In every way. Shall we be different, just for the sake of being different? No. We must be different for the sake of being separate, and holy, and spiritual. The world is wholly of the flesh. If we are truly God's holy people, we should be anxious not to conform to the world—to its fashion, its customs, its festivals, its general activity.

Conformity is an unthinking herd instinct. It betrays a small mind, a lack of maturity and intelligence, a lack of the ability to strike an independent course, and to act according to schooled wisdom, instead of mindless custom and copying.

"But be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

This word *transformed* is, in English, "*metamorphosed*". The term applies to such changes in nature as that from a grub to a butterfly. It is used in only two other places. One is that very beautiful and significant verse in 2 Corinthians 3:18—

"We all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord, are changed (Now are we? Are we being changed — "metamorphosed") into the same image, (that necessary image of Christ — how is it coming along?) from glory to glory, even as by the spirit of the Lord."

That is what Paul is talking about. If we are truly in this way of life, this is what is happening to us, obviously and apparently. We are steadily being changed, by study and meditation and prayer from one degree of glory to another, ever more and more like Christ.

The other instance of the use of this word is the transfiguration. Christ was transfigured (*metamorphosed*) before them. They saw him manifested in the glory of immortal divinity, even as he now is eternally.

"By the renewing of your mind. . ."

Renewing is the proper translation, but we may get the wrong impression from it. For renewing

usually means restoring to an original condition. But here it means to create an entirely new condition—something in us that has never before existed. To create a new man of the spirit—new interests, new motives, a complete new character.

"That ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

This is what we have to prove or manifest to the world — the good, the acceptable, and perfect will of God. The word "*prove*" means to test by experience, to discern by doing. We can only learn the will of God by doing it. No one can merely learn it theoretically. It is only those who obey, that understand it.

Verse 3: "*For I say. . .*"

The "*for*" again, makes a connection with what he has just said. For the caution in this verse is against deluding ourselves that we are on the path of life, if we are not doing what he has just said we must do: give our bodies a living sacrifice. We must, he says here, "*think soberly.*"

Now most people do not think at all — in any true sense. Thinking is about the hardest work that there is, that is, deliberate, controlled thinking along a line contrary to the natural, animal bent of the mind and interest. Only intense love and zeal can keep us at it, and then it becomes joy.

"Think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man (and we emphasize the every) the measure of faith."

What is the measure of faith that God has dealt to every man — and, of course, woman — sisters? It is clear from what he says in verses 4-8 that he is speaking of the capabilities that God gives each and the work he assigns to each one in the body — *each* one. How do we know what work He has assigned to us?

If we diligently prepare and develop ourselves in the word and in the mind of Christ, as Paul has outlined above, we shall find that the work will come in abundance. There will be no problem about that. There is always a vast mountain of work to be done for the Truth, for those who have eyes to see and hearts to desire—desire to serve.

Now Paul goes on to the practical application of this living sacrifice. Verses 4 and 5:

"For as we have many members in one body (think about the human body), and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another."

This analogy of the human body to the body of Christ teaches us many things. *First, all are different.* The human body has a vast variety of different functions, internal and external—almost inconceivable. And *all* are needed. So we, every one, have an essential place to fill. And if any one member shirks their place that they must fill—their duty, the body is burdened and handicapped. If enough do it, it dies. It can't be healthy.

Second, all are interdependent. All usually need each other. We each need, and we each are needed. Some say they prefer isolation. They do not understand the beauty of the Truth. For a faithful member there is no such thing as isolation—it's impossible.

Our physical circumstances may separate us. But if we are not actively and totally at one with the body, in continuous communication, giving and receiving to the fullest extent of our abilities and opportunities, we are not a living sacrifice—we are not even part of the body.

Third, all have a work to do. There is no room in the body for drones or parasites. We may be, physically, so immobilized that thinking about the body and praying about the body is the limit of our capabilities. But that does not excuse us from faithfully fulfilling what we can do—our limit.

The flesh is naturally lazy, and selfish, and self-centred. Listen to Paul. It must be peaceably fought. This is the good fight of faith, and only the fighters are the victors.

The work falls into two general categories: the ministry of the word and the practical ministry of the many tasks that have to be arranged and done. Some are better at one aspect, and some at another. But they greatly overlap, and all can be useful in both. Both are absolutely vital to the health of the body.

The lazy tendency of the flesh, the diabolos that we all have, is to leave the work to others in both categories. The flesh desires to sit with its hands folded and be spoon-fed. Now spoon-feeding is fine, for babies. It is natural; it is normal; it is a beautiful manifestation of helpless need and loving care. But spoon-feeding for adults is a sad tragedy of retardation.

It has been announced for a year exactly what chapters we would read and consider in our classes this week. How many have diligently and prayerfully studied those chapters so as to be able to benefit themselves and others? We will not ask for a show of hands.

To what extent do we comprehend a living sacrifice? And then there is the practical side of the work of the body. The tendency of the diabolos within us is to lazily, selfishly leave it to others. Which one is winning the battle within us—the diabolos or the spirit? When volunteers are called for to help with the work, there should be an eager deluge of response. This is the infinite privilege of serving Christ, so that he may welcome us when he returns. It's reciprocal.

"When saw we thee hungry and did not feed thee?"

It should never be necessary to call for volunteers more than once. Cleaning the restrooms is equally important with giving the lectures. Both are necessary parts of the work of the body. To what extent do we comprehend a living sacrifice? Or, are we just drifting along to disaster in our selfish little dreamboat?

Fourth, the work of each as healthy living parts of the glorious body of Christ is a full time work. Where would the human body be—how long would it even endure, if the various parts decided

they would only work part time—just as it appealed to their fancy?

A living sacrifice is not a part time thing — a hobby, an amusement, as we see fit. The Truth is not a spectator sport. It is all or nothing. The time available to us at best is so terribly brief, but it is enough if every minute is wisely and faithfully used.

In verses 8 and 9, he speaks of a different aspect of the works of the body. There are seven: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, ruling, and showing mercy. Now was he speaking just of the first century gifts of the spirit, or the general gifts and talents of all for all time? And is he speaking just of the official ecclesial functions, or of the duties and privileges of all as essential members of the one body?

Surely, we must take the larger view in both cases. To restrict them to the spirit gifts is to rob them of any meaning and value for ourselves. Paul is speaking broadly of the essential living sacrifice that all—*all* must make who have any hope of life. And if we restrict them to the official ecclesial functions, we sow the fatal seeds of ecclesiasticism and the fleshly separation of clergy and laity.

These instructions are for all. The duties are for all. The glorious privilege of total, joyful labour and service is for all. And the final, unspeakable, eternal reward is for all who discern and follow the narrow path of total dedication that leads to that reward—the living sacrifice. Paul lists seven. They clearly encompass all the activities of the life of service and holiness that God requires.

And we note that each one is qualified as to how it is to be done. There must not only be a doing, but it must be in the right way and to the right extent.

The first one, prophecy. This simply, and in essence, is speaking for the Word, proclaiming the Truth. It is a duty for all. Let him that heareth, say come. It takes many forms—public and private, oral and written. The conception of foretelling the future is but a minor and secondary meaning of the word prophecy.

The qualification: "*Let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith.*" This is the measure of faith of verse 3 — the ability, opportunity, and capacity for active manifestation of faith that each is given. Faith lives only by work. We all have far more capacity than we ever use. Some day we shall have to give an account.

Second, ministry. The original is "*diakonia*", from which we get deacon. This is the practical end—all the actual work and labour that must be done to enable the body to function usefully and constructively. Much of it is in the background and unseen—the meals and buildings, the supplies and arrangements. This gathering could not function effectively without a tremendous amount of this work by somebody.

Note that this is put second, right after prophesying and before teaching and exhorting. Now these different aspects of the work of the body are not necessarily put in strict order of importance. But certainly it is significant that the practical labour is high on the list.

Third, teaching. That is, explaining and instructing—the next step beyond prophesying or proclaiming. Certainly there is much overlapping. These are not strict, water-tight compartments. But Paul is outlining the general range of the work of the body, and emphasizing that God in His wisdom has made some members more capable of one thing and some of another, to enforce the mutual interdependence.

It is very good for the unity of the body, when we find and freely recognize that others can do certain things much better than we can. However, we must be sure, very sure, that the difference is not just a matter of greater effort, greater zeal, greater self-discipline on the part of the one who appears to excel. All too often, this is the case. We never use a fraction of our capabilities. We lazily attribute more inspiration, when it is really just a matter of more perspiration.

Fourth, exhortation. There seems rather a fine line between teaching and exhortation, because each should contain a measure of the other. Teaching is sterile without exhortation. And exhortation is

shallow and weak without teaching. But Paul does mention them separately, for they are two aspects of the work.

Exhortation is an important aspect of the mutual work of the body, within and upon itself. The word is “*parakaleo*”, which is the verb that corresponds to the noun “*parakletos*.” We're familiar with that. It's usually translated “*comforter*.” It is the term Christ used for the Holy Spirit which he would send to guide the Apostles. Literally, it means to call to one's side: *parakaleo*, or to call near.

Now literal derivations are not always particularly helpful. But in this case, it is good; it is essential to bear in mind that the word means to call near, to call to one's side.

We mention this, because if this is not the intention and result, to cause a closeness, to close a gap, to draw both understanding and affection close together, it has not fulfilled the true function of scriptural exhortation. Its meaning is not limited simply to comfort.

It also means to warn, beseech, guide, exhort, to induce to take a certain course of action by a line of reason. And it is not limited to the platform. We are instructed to exhort one another daily. That is, we are to constantly warn, beseech, and guide one another.

Now it would be obvious that this is a potentially dangerous instrument. Unskillfully used, it can degenerate into mere harping and criticism, and can result in resentment and estrangement. Therefore, it must always be tested by its root meaning of causing to draw near.

If an exhortation is not sincerely intended and designed to cause a greater closeness, a drawing together between speaker and hearer, both of understanding and agreement on the one side and also of mutual communion and love on the other, or if, though so intended, it does not have that result, but the very opposite result, then it is a spiritual failure. And worse than a failure, it is not a true, effective exhortation. It has done harm instead of good. It has not drawn together.

Paul, as he opens this chapter, uses exactly the same word, although there it is translated “beseech”. Paul's exhortation is very strong and searching, but it does not cause offence or widen the gap. Because it is brotherly, because it is affectionate, because it is obviously according to truth and holiness, because he lifts it in reverence to the spiritual plain of God's mercy—God's glorious mercy—and because it is clearly designed to strengthen the bonds of closeness and fellowship.

“I beseech you, therefore, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice. . . which is your reasonable service.”

(Taken from “Be Ye Transformed” Volume 4, Pages 299-308, by Bro. G. V. Growcott.)