

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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.*

*<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> 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. (Romans 12:1-8)*

### **What Service Pleases God?**

Imagine a young college graduate who lands a job with a big, multinational corporation. He or she is excited about the opportunity. That graduate worked hard in college and put together the best resume a young person could have. He or she gives it all they've got in that new job because there are lots of opportunities to advance. One day, that graduate asked to make a presentation to the company's leading executives. The CEO escorts them to the boardroom telling them how much that CEO values the input of the men and women who will be sitting around the table. But when they walk into the boardroom, that young graduate does a doubletake. There are no VP's there. There's nobody there from HR or product development or marketing. The people sitting around the table are janitors and cafeteria workers and the grounds crew. These are the people whose work the CEO values most.

We could only wish, right? In the real world, even if a CEO values the work of janitors and cafeteria workers and grounds crews, he's not going to make them his senior staff. And when we get to heaven, I don't know who Jesus is going to consider to be his senior staff. But remember, when James and John wanted to be included, Jesus told them that those positions belonged to people God had chosen. And my point this morning is it's not about who gets to be on top of heaven. God values service. To be the servants God wants us to be, we need to know the answer to the question: **what kind of service does God value?**

#### **I.**

**Service that comes from faith.** St. Paul wrote, **"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."** What does that passage mean? What image does offering your bodies as living sacrifices conjure up in your mind? In the Old Testament, God required his people to bring animal sacrifices. But I don't kill an animal during church very often. Much less, would I let any of you jump up on the altar and be killed. God no longer requires animal sacrifices of his New Testament people because those sacrifices were pictures of Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross to pay for our sins.

So what does Paul mean when he tells us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices? He means that everything that we do with these bodies should be given to God. In other words, God wants our whole life. So what we do at work and what we do at play, how we treat our spouse and our children and our parents, how we drive and work in our gardens, every minute of every day is supposed to belong to God. What would that look like? It wouldn't mean that we would walk around with our hands folded all the time. It wouldn't mean that we never laugh or have fun. But if we really offered our whole lives to Jesus, we would avoid sinning even when we were having fun. We would be different from the world around us.

Are we ready to offer our bodies as living sacrifices? Why would we even consider it? St. Paul says, **"in view of God's mercy."** God was up in heaven where everything was great. There was no pain or sadness there. But he looked down here and he saw how hard our lives can be. Worse, he saw that it's our own fault. Sin is the cause of all pain and sorrow here, and guess what? We're the ones who sin. Can anyone here honestly deny that we are our own worst enemies? We can't control our tempers. We can't control our tongues. We act without thinking or we think too much and fail to act. We make our lives so much worse than they

would have to be – and that’s just the stuff we can see. God looked down and he even saw the stuff that we can’t see or that we refuse to see. He saw the damage we do to ourselves every single day, and the damage we do to the people we love and even to strangers. He saw death and hell coming to us because of all that sin. And he had to do something about it. He sent Jesus to pay for our sins. He sent Jesus to rescue us from pain here and death and even from hell itself. In view of that mercy, God calls us to offer our bodies to him. That mercy leads us to trust in what Jesus won and that faith leads us to offer our lives to him.

But again, what does a life offered to God look like? In many ways, it’s unremarkable. It’s a wife showing kindness to her husband. It’s a parent walking the floor with a fussy baby at two in the morning. It’s a neighbor mowing the lawn for the elderly lady next door. It’s refraining from profanity and listening to people who are struggling. It’s simple, humble service. And you might argue that unbelievers do all those things, too, and you would be right! But for us, all those things are manifestations of our faith. We think about them and we do them because of all that Jesus did for us.

But there’s more. St. Paul says, **“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”** Our minds need to be renewed by the gospel and transformed to think like God thinks. When it comes to how we spend our Sunday mornings and what we do with the wealth God has given us, when it comes to how we view life in the modern world, we need to listen to God first. And that’s hard, because we absorb the thinking of this world. Sometimes we don’t even realize it’s happening. We have to constantly renew our minds through the gospel. That transforms the way we think. The result? St. Paul says that then we will understand and approve of God’s will. To be able to do it God’s way, we have to have faith. That faith explores the word of God and it changes us. Day by day, we understand and agree with God more and more, so that’s how we choose to live.

## II.

God cares about why we do things. Making our bodies living sacrifices is more than just going through the motions of being nice. Our sacrifice springs from our faith in Jesus. Because that’s true, all the ways we sacrifice also demonstrate our faith in Jesus. Jesus told us many times that we will be recognized by the fruits of our faith. So St. Paul spends the rest of this reading describing how faith shows itself in the life of the church. So, **what service does God value? Service that reflects faith.**

St. 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.”** In our world, how do you tell if someone is important? They have titles. They have offices. They have authority and they usually get paid more money. We treat people like that with special respect. But we shouldn’t be fooled by those things. I have an office. I have a title. You all do a wonderful job of treating me with respect because God called me to be your pastor. But there’s a real temptation for me to let that go to my head. I could start to think that my service as your pastor is worth more to God than your service as Christians. Then, I could start to set up a scale of important jobs versus less important ones. Serving on the church council is more important than serving as an usher or cleaning the pews after church. Knocking on doors and inviting people to church is more important than taking care of your children. Giving to the Lord is more important than taking care of your parents.

None of those statements is true. God does not evaluate us on the basis of what jobs we do. God looks at our faith. And I am continually humbled by the clear and simple faith of the people of God. I hear you express trust in your Savior in situations where I might be more inclined to whine and complain. Every time I sit down with our church council or one of our boards, every time I see members who just come in and do the things that need to be done, I wonder if I would do those things if it weren’t my job to be here. Sunday school teachers and board members and people who volunteer to do maintenance all have lives. They all have other responsibilities. Most of them are still working. And they’re also husbands and wives, parents and children. And from what I can see, they’re doing those jobs, too. Yet, they show up here. All that service at home and at church shows faith.

That faith doesn’t show itself in the same way for everybody. Just like our bodies have many different organs and we need all those organs to be healthy and complete, the church is one body, made up of many members. St. Paul calls us to be diligent in doing the work God calls us to do and to trust God who decides how we’re gifted and where he wants to plug us in. God doesn’t rank my service above yours just because I am a

pastor. God asks rather, are you and I faithful in preaching or counting the money or parenting our children or cleaning the school? Are we demonstrating our trust in Jesus when we do those things?

Paul ends this reading with one of several different lists that he makes of ways of serving God. Notice how different the parts of the body of Christ are. We need people to preach and teach the gospel. That will always be true. But we also need people who are good at picking up the hurting and encouraging them to trust in Jesus, and people who are compassionate to those who are in need. This world hurts and the church is designed to minister to that. We need people who are good at giving – it takes money to run the church. We need people who are good at leading – someone has to administer the gifts God gives to the church. And one is not more important than another. Notice that Paul lists “serving” near the top of the list. His goal is to encourage us to do the work God calls us to do to the best of our ability in order to give a good testimony to the love of Jesus.

Once again, to see things that way, we have to be transformed. If we look at our service the way the world looks at jobs, then we’re going to assume that guys who stand up in front, guys who have titles and offices and get paid more are more important. That’s not how God calls us to look at it but it’s hard to shake ourselves free of that thinking. That shows how strong the sin in our hearts really is. Likewise, that temptation to pride, that temptation to think that we deserve a place at the big table in heaven is also sin. And resentment of how God calls us to serve, jealousy of other people and their gifts, and our need for praise show our sin, too. God is not pleased with that kind of ego. And can any of us really claim to be free from that kind of thinking? We’re sinners and pride is in our nature.

But that’s why Jesus came. That is the mercy that God showed us. Jesus lived a life of perfect, humble service. Even by the standards of his day, he was poor. The ruler of heaven and earth stood at the bottom of Israel’s social ladder. Jesus lowered himself to serve, so that we can have the credit for his perfect life. And he died and paid for all our pride and all our sin, for the fact that we can’t break free of thinking the way the world thinks. He died and paid for all the times we did the right things for the wrong reasons, even when he did them to stroke our own egos. And his blood washed all that sin away. Jesus rose to tell us that we are forgiven. God doesn’t see our sin anymore. We are holy in his sight and we will live with him in heaven forever, where our hearts finally will be holy.

In view of that mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Paul says, **“That is your true and proper worship.”** When we come here, we do worship God. But there are 168 hours in a week. And we only spend one or two of them in church. But every time our faith shows itself in love and service to God and to our neighbor, we are worshipping our Savior. We are pointing to him and saying, “That’s who we follow.” Make your life a life of service to God because God made Jesus’ life a life of service for you. Amen.