

## BY THE MERCIES OF GOD

### INTRO

Some of you might be asking: “Romans? I thought we finished that series last week. Chapter 11 ended with a glorious crescendo of praise and doxology – for eleven chapters, Paul has painted the gospel in epic brush strokes of mercy – isn’t that it, Paul?”

What we’re about to see is that Paul’s doxology did not end his letter, but it did mark a significant shift in focus.

In chapters 1-11, Paul focuses on the content of the gospel – what *is* the gospel? In the remaining chapters, he shifts to the application of this gospel – what change does the gospel make in someone’s life?

- So we’re moving from gospel doctrines // to gospel duties
- From the heart of the gospel // to the legs of the gospel
- From God’s mercy poured into our hearts // to God’s mercy overflowing out to God and neighbor

Our passage this morning sets the stage for the practical application chapters that follow – subjects like using spiritual gifts, loving our enemies and submission to civil authorities.

Our text answers the question: “What affect does God’s mercy have on a life?”

Let’s find out:

### [READ Romans 12:1-2]

[Picture a young father sitting around the breakfast table with his wife and kids. A trained historian and a Marine, Lyle Dorsett had professed faith in Christ at 15, but since then had veered off like the prodigal. Addicted to academic success and alcohol, his life was held together by a string. But his wife Mary had recently been born again and was praying for him. Every morning during breakfast, his wife Mary would read aloud to their kids from C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As Lyle heard of Aslan, the majestic King of Narnia who gave his life to save the selfish, traitorous Edmund, his prodigal heart began to soften to the gospel message of

God's mercy for him in Jesus Christ. What affect would this mercy have on a young, self-consumed husband and father?]

### I. **By the Mercies of God**

This phrase has hung in my mind for weeks: "By the mercies of God." Paul knew that for those who have genuinely received mercy from God, there is always a lasting effect.

Why begin with this phrase? It's tempting to move quickly past it to get to the "good stuff."

Let's answer that by asking two more questions:

#### 1) What is this mercy Paul speaks of?

- a. The original word translated here "mercy" means "tender concern for someone in trying conditions or distress."<sup>1</sup>
- b. Notice it's plural – "*mercies* of God" – perhaps because there are too many to count – As Jeremiah well knew, "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning..." (Lamentations 3:22-23).
- c. Paul has specific mercies in mind here – notice the "Therefore" (whenever you see a 'therefore,' stop and ask what it's there for) – with this one word, Paul reaches back and scoops all of chapters 1-11 into a bucket and says, "Look at all these mercies:
  - i. Ro. 1-3 – whether Gentiles or Jews, none are good, no one is righteous, all sit justly under God's wrath for sin and rebellion against God
  - ii. Ro. 3-8 – sinners who cling to Jesus by faith are justified freely by his grace, have peace with God, are those who have been freed from slavery to sin and for whom there is now no condemnation in Christ Jesus – not only that, but they are adopted children of God as their Abba Father, from whom not even death can separate them
  - iii. Ro. 9-11 – all this applies not just to Jews but also Gentiles

**That's a loaded "therefore"!**

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<sup>1</sup> William Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*, p. 249.

In short, the mercy Paul speaks of is embodied in a Person – the heir of David and Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

2) Why does Paul mention God’s mercy again before moving to practical application?

It’s simple – experiencing God’s mercy is the only way to carry out the commands he’s about to give.

Paul appeals to us “by the mercies of God” to do the things he commands in 12ff. **Gratitude for God’s mercy is the only fountain for fulfilling God’s commands.**

If we don’t see our need for God’s mercy in Christ, the rest of Romans will feel like a to-do list that we can never achieve.

Or even more dangerous, we might think that we’re the hero of the story – “look at me, God! I’m a living sacrifice, I’m renewing my mind, I’m loving my enemies,” All the while missing the point – that it’s God’s mercy to us that overflows into these tangible acts of love for God and neighbor.

And his command is this:

## II. **Present Your Bodies as a Living Sacrifice**

What does this mean?

Put simply, it’s a complete giving over of ourselves to God and his purposes.

We see this in the phrase: “Present yourselves” – that word literally means “to put at one’s disposal.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Ruth: “Where you go, I will go.”

Like Isaiah: “Here I am, send me.”

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<sup>2</sup> Danker, p. 272.

And then there's the whole "sacrifice" thing; there's no mistaking the meaning of that.

It recalls the Old Testament practice of animal sacrifice – one similarity is that in animal sacrifice and in a living sacrifice, all is given. Nothing is held back. For us this means body, soul, even attitudes and our thought lives.

But this is different in several ways from the OT practice:

- 1) Paul not advocating for human blood sacrifice – this is a bloodless sacrifice
- 2) Not a sacrifice of atonement to pay for our sins – that's already been done – instead it's more akin to the free will offering offered as an overflow of gratitude

Paul uses four words to describe this sacrifice:

1. "living" – wait, isn't the point of a sacrifice that whatever is being sacrificed dies? Yes, there is a death here.

Not a physical death but what Paul speaks of in Ro 6:3 – "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?"

And again in Galatians 2:20 – "I have been crucified with Christ."

There is a death – a death to sin, a death to the old self to make way for the new creation in Christ.

So how is it a living sacrifice? Because the life of the Christian is modeled after the life of Christ: death leading to resurrection – Paul goes on in Romans 6: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Death to life. A *living sacrifice*.

The second word Paul uses to describe this sacrifice is:

2. "holy" – the sense of being consecrated/ set apart for service to God in whatever way he calls us

There is also the element that God's mercy changes us so that we want to be like him, to be holy in all our conduct because he who called us is holy (I Peter 1:15). Similarly, the third:

3. "acceptable to God" – desire conduct that pleases God – remember Jesus' words, quoting Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." That God looks at the heart, not the outward appearance.  
[APP: There is no way to fake a living sacrifice. In OT animal sacrifices, you could fake it. You could bring an animal to the temple while your heart was not in it. A *living* sacrifice can't be faked. It can't be coerced. It only comes as a genuine response to God's mercy.]
4. Finally, Paul calls it our "spiritual worship" – you may have a footnote in your Bible – like "rational service," which is actually a more literal translation. The idea is that giving our whole selves to God as worship makes sense – it's rational service to God – it's the only worship that makes sense in response to the God who gave himself wholly for us.<sup>3</sup>

So we are to present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God – a complete giving of ourselves over to his will, his Kingdom, his glory.

This still sounds a bit lofty, perhaps even abstract. How do I offer myself completely to God? What does this look like?

Paul says: **the way you offer yourself as a sacrifice to God is by the renewal of your mind.**

### III. Be Transformed by the Renewal of Your Mind

Do our minds really need renewing, Paul? Keep it abstract, don't start praying into my thought life.

Remember what he said in chapter 1?

"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Thielman, *Romans*, p. 568.

hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools..." (1:21-22).

This kind of mind would never willingly give itself wholly to God in worship.

It's what one pastor called "stinkin' thinkin'."<sup>4</sup> Jesus changes our minds by making them new.

This is a two-part command – don't do this, but do this:

1) "Do not be conformed to this world"

First, what does he mean by, "this world"?

Literally this "present age" – as opposed to the age to come.<sup>5</sup>

This age characterized by rebellion against God's Kingdom and its King – focused on temporary, immediate pleasure, power, possessions.

I John sums up the values of this world as "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life" (I John 2:16).

These come to us in countless ways through music, the news, podcasts, social media, fortune cookies – I think we underestimate how shaped we are by this world.

That's exactly what Paul urges against. "Don't be conformed."

Literally don't allow yourself to be shaped into the mold of the world – to be changed ever so subtly by influences in opposition to who we are in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Peter puts it this way: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance" (I Peter 1:14).

[Picture a cookie mold – it's fall so let's say it's a pumpkin shaped cookie cutter. Paul saying, "Don't allow yourself to be molded and cut and shaped into a pumpkin!"]

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<sup>4</sup> Pastor Harry Reeder, Briarwood Presbyterian Church

<sup>5</sup> Zerwick, *Grammatical Analysis of the NT*, p. 486.

<sup>6</sup> Danker, p. 344.

If we're honest, it's harder than we let on. There's a pull to be conformed to the world – like a magnetic sway or a gravitational pull.

You don't even have to exert any effort – it's easy to be swept along in the current, like in a lazy river, just bobbing along, all the while growing in love for this age, prizing the things this age treasures. How do we get out of this current? Paul says the only way out is to get into a stronger current.

“Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed” – don't be pulled and molded in this direction. Be pulled and changed in an entirely different way.

Notice, these are the only two possibilities.

## 2) So what does it mean to be transformed?

- Root word translated “transformed” is ‘metamorphoo’ – literally means ‘to undergo complete alteration.’<sup>7</sup> Where we get metamporphosis – process of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly
- Isn't this the point of the Christian life – as Paul said in Ro 8:29, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” – looking more and more like Jesus.

How does this transformation happen?

Paul says, “by the renewal of your mind”

That word “renewal” – “to make new again” – “a makeover of the mind.”<sup>8</sup>

[When we moved into our house last December, we knew it needed some work – previous owners had three dogs who seemed to have spent a lot of time in our bedroom – the carpet told the story. So we had a carpet cleaner come clean the carpet –

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<sup>7</sup> Danker, p. 230.

<sup>8</sup> Danker, p. 25.

I'll never forget what he said as he left, his face looking like he was about to tell me some tragedy: "We gave it our best, but we don't work miracles."

The carpet needed a miracle. Needed to be completely new. Danielle's uncle helped us rip everything out and put in new flooring]

Flooring is one thing, but what is the effect of our minds being made new?

"that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"

The idea here is being able to discern between the will of God and the way of the world.

That as our minds are renewed, we develop new appetites. The things of this world begin to lose their appeal, and the things of the age to come become more alluring to us – more precious. Things like the word, prayer, making disciples, loving God, loving our neighbor, even loving our enemies, seeing God's glory in creation, and the like.

We begin to ask questions like "Is this \_\_\_\_\_ (song, tv show, friendship, etc) helpful for my soul? Is it feeding a love for this present age or fueling a longing for the age that has already dawned in Christ?]

Things that used to taste sweet begin to taste bitter – that's not who I am anymore, I'm a new creation in Christ with new spiritual senses – my mind is being renewed to crave God's will – that which is good and acceptable and perfect – "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, whatever is excellent, whatever is worthy of praise" – I want to think on these things now, by the mercies of God.



Are the things of this world becoming bitter to you? Are the things of the world to come becoming more sweet?

[One of my favorite classes in seminary was on the life of C.S. Lewis. Guess who taught it? We called him Dr. Dorsett, the man who once sat around the breakfast table listening in on Aslan and Edmund and the stone table. Once a prodigal father and husband, God's mercy struck his heart, bringing him out of addiction and into a life of gratitude-fueled love for God and neighbor. Then in his 70's, tenderly nursing his wife through cancer and taking a genuine interest in students' lives, it begs the question: "What changed him?"

Maybe it wasn't just a children's fairy tale. Maybe it was all true.

The better Aslan – the living sacrifice that split history in two.

No more goats, no more lambs.

Now our very selves we offer to this King until the day when we will be fully transformed into his image, even as we see him face to face.