

## **Sermon 138: Romans 12:1: Responding to the Gospel**

### **OUTLINE**

Paul's appeal  
God's mercies  
Our worship

### **INTRODUCTION**

Why and how should we be holy? That is the question we are now concerning ourselves with as we reach the second part of Romans. The first part of Romans was 'How does God save?'; now we are looking at how we are to live now that we are saved. If you can remember back to our first message on Romans we compared Paul's letter to a giant meaty sandwich. The two slices of bread being the intro of 1:1-15, and the conclusion of the letter in chapter 16, and sandwiched in between was the meaty message of the gospel. As we took a step closer to our giant sandwich we saw that there were two major parts to it, chapters 1-11 made up the doctrinal part of the letter which focused on the gospel, and 12-15 made up the practical part which focused on how Christians must now live that they are saved. As we took another step closer to our Guinness world record breaking sandwich we saw that there were five slightly smaller sections to this meaty filling. The central theme of Paul's letter to the Romans is the 'gospel of God' introduced in the very first verse. And so these 5 sections all unpack aspects of this gospel. 1:18-3:20 was *The Necessity of the Gospel*, here we looked at the bad news that all are sinners and need God to save us for we cannot save ourselves. In 3:21-4:25 we looked at *The Provision of the Gospel*, here we saw how God saves by grace through faith, through Christ as our propitiation. In 5-8 we looked at *The Benefits of the Gospel*, here we saw our assurance and how we are saved to the uttermost. And we saw Paul deal with the two questions that would arise in the legalists mind. 'What will ensure holiness if we are not saved by the law?' And, 'Doesn't the gospel of grace make the law bad?' In 9-11, Paul anticipated an objection to the statement that God saves all those who He elects. He expects people to object that if nothing can separate the elect from God's love what about the Jews, they were elect and are now rejected. In these chapters God spoke about how all Israel is not Israel and God final plan for the Jews. Having expanded on the Gospel at length Paul now comes to the part where we make our response.

Chapters 12-16 divide up very easily. Stott gives this helpful outline: 12:1-2 speaks about our relationship to God with consecrated bodies and renewed minds. 12:3-8 speaks about our relationship to ourselves by thinking soberly about our gifts. 12:9-16 speaks about our relationship to one another by loving as family. 12:17-21 speaks about our relationship to our enemies with service not retaliation. 13:1-7 speaks about our relationship to the state as conscientious citizenship. 13:8-10 speaks of our relationship to the law with neighbour love fulfilling it. 13:11-14 speaks of our relationship with the times and living in the already but not yet. 14:1-15:13 speaks about our relationship to the weak by welcoming them and not despising, judging or offending them. 15:14-16:27 the letter ends with Paul giving the Romans information on his ministry and giving his greetings.

Today we are going to be focusing in on 12:1. These first two verses are a summary of our response which encompasses our whole lives. v1 is positive, v2 is put in the negative. As we look at v1 we want to note, Paul's appeal, God's mercies and our worship.

### **Paul's appeal**

Holiness is not an optional extra to salvation. Paul has mapped out for us a grand gospel where God is the author and finisher of our salvation, how all things are from Him, through Him and to Him. Paul has waxed lyrical on how we cannot save ourselves by our works. How the Jews have missed the righteousness offered to them in Christ for eternal life because they insist on resting on their own righteousness. The gospel of grace taught by Paul insists that we cannot save ourselves, God must do it in Christ, and the way we are saved is not by adding to Christ's finished work, but by the non-meriting, receiving act of faith. Many have heard this message and misunderstood it thinking that because we are saved by grace, that there is no insistence on holiness. This is a lie. Here in Romans 12-16 we have Paul laying out what is expected of all those who are saved. You will notice in verse 1 that he addresses the 'brothers' or brethren, this is the collective term for the church and he appeals to them to give their all to the God who has saved them.

The word 'appeal' in our translations, which is beseech in others is a strong word. Our English translations do not quite capture it. It is something between request and command. The best word is probably 'exhort' where we see Paul earnestly calling us to perform what is already our duty. As John Calvin put it in his comments on this verse, 'We are redeemed by the Lord for the purpose of consecrating ourselves and all our members to him.' The gospel is not about getting our fire insurance and then living any way we please but we are saved to serve. Paul's appeal lays the necessity of this obligation upon us. This life of service is a necessity not because we do it in order to save ourselves, Christ has done that. No it is necessary by virtue of God's appointment. He has created us in Christ Jesus for good works, Eph. 2:10, 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' You cannot read Romans 1-11 on the gospel and then get to Romans 12 and decide that this part is not for you. This is what you have been saved to, saved for; if this is not part of your faith then you do not have the biblical faith that always issues in holiness and good works. We have been laying a lot of stress on God's gospel of grace and attempted to emphasize it as much as Paul. Well now that we have entered into that section of Romans that looks at the Christian life that must necessarily follow all true faith, we must match Paul's emphasis here still.

Are you a Christian here today? Then know this holiness is not optional it is your new life, your business, your purpose, it is what God remade you in Christ for. God has a desire not only to save you but to put on display the beauty of His Son through you. He has given you His Spirit to conform you to the image of Christ, to put Him on display by our holiness, our love, our sacrifice, and our worship of Him.

The necessity of holiness is laid upon us not only because God commands it and created us for it, it necessarily flows from the work of raising us with Christ. In Romans 6 Paul spoke about our dying to the power of sin, about our new existence as resurrected with Christ which included the new ability to put sin aside and serve God, to present our lives to Him for holy living. The seed of God abides in us, it grows and brings about inevitable fruit that is apparent in every life where it is planted. If there are any who claim to be saved by the gospel of grace, and don't have romans 12-15 evident as their pursuit in life then I have to say with James, your faith is dead and it is not the saving faith spoken of in the Bible.

### **God's mercies**

But we must get the order correct, notice that Paul calls upon us to give all to God, 'by the mercies of God.' In the Greek this is literally 'through the mercies of God.' In other words, the mercies of God are so conspicuous and so overwhelming, that they have a mouth and speak for themselves and draw us to the irresistible conclusion that we should be giving our

whole selves to God in response to such an amazing gospel. In other words, Paul is not merely making a baseless appeal; he is confronting us with the overwhelming mercies of God as our motivation.

Paul's appeal implies that we must be holy, the fact that he appeals through the mercies of God indicates the why of our holiness. Why be holy? Christianity gives a different answer to every other religion on this matter. All religions have a moral code and call us to be better people. Some religious obedience is offered out of a fear of judgement, do it or you will go to hell is the message. Some tell us that if we are good we can bribe God and get things that we want. Some tell us that we need a crutch, something to give us a reason for living, to give us identity. Christianity does save us from hell, but that is not the primary motivation for giving ourselves to God. Christianity is a religion of grace and we cannot bribe or manipulate God through our good deeds or gifts. We are broken and dependent sinners who need to rediscover the purpose and identity that God gave us when He made us, to be worshippers of Him living in holy loving community in the truth. But as you look at the way Paul seeks to motivate us, he appeals to God's mercies, he leads with God's mercies as our primary motivation. The voice that we are to hear is the siren of the gospel calling us to holiness, not a man.

This is Paul's typical pattern. He speaks about what God has done for us, and then in light of that calls us to do for God. This order of doing for Him who has first done for us, is not merely one of politeness but the purity of the gospel is at stake in this order. In many of Paul's writings we see Paul beginning with God's work. In Eph. 1-3 Paul rehearses the Gospel before he outlines the Christian life we are to live in light of what He has done. In Colossians we see the same pattern, and here too in Romans. We love because He loved us first, we did not choose Him but He chose us that we should go and bear much fruit, we pursue holiness because He has saved us, to reverse this order is fatal. In theological terms we call this rooting the imperative in the indicative, the voice of command is grounded in God's accomplishments. The power of our doing, the motivation of our doing, the acceptability of our doing it all flows from His first saving us.

There are many Christians who do not have this order right. They think I have to do in order to go to heaven. They think that their Christian performance is what finally secures their eternal right to being in God's holy presence. There is no greater soul destroying truth. Imagine that your eternity depended upon your performance that day. 'I cannot work my soul to save for that my Lord has done; but I will work like any slave for love of God's dear Son.' Do you see that God came to you when you were unlovely and gave His Son for you when you were His enemy and He has done all to justify the wicked? And now that you are saved there is no longer any judgement day, any condemnation for you. He loved you despite your sin, and gave Jesus to pay for it, you are saved by this, not your best Christian obedience. Now you can offer your good deeds to God, not in fear, not under coercion, nor merely from a sense of duty; but rather because you are a child with all the privileges and possessions of a co-heir with Christ. Guilt, grace, gratitude, that is the pattern of our salvation.

There may even be someone who is not a Christian here today who thinks, 'I can't become a Christian I am not good enough.' That is a lie, Christ died for the ungodly, come as you are, you will never be good enough. God's grace comes before your goodness to enable it. Only if you humble yourself as you are in your sin and ask for mercy will you receive new life and a new ability to begin to be good.

## **Our worship**

We have seen that we should be holy, and why we should be holy, now Paul tells us what holiness looks like. We will see that gives us a memorable image for what our own devoting ourselves to God should look like, 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, which is your spiritual worship.' Paul borrows his language from the world of religious sacrifice. There are many observations we need to make from this sentence. Firstly, the word 'present' is the word one would use when presenting an animal for sacrifice in the OT. And the fact that we are bringing ourselves and not an animal as our worship is extremely significant and highlights the new way in which we worship because of Christ. In the OT in order to sustain fellowship with a holy God who dwelt in the midst of Israel the whole nation, as well as the priests, as well as individually, we had to offer sacrifices for sin. Even if we just wanted to worship God in thanksgiving it had to be with a blood sacrifice because of our sin. The Lord had appointed a way of worship that sustained the fellowship of God and Israel that depended on an innocent and unblemished sacrifice dying for the sins of the people so that the justice of a holy God would accept the death of the animal in token for the sinner's death. But all of this was only a preparation for Christ. He was the Lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world, He was the sacrifice that every sacrifice since the animal God killed to clothe Adam and Eve pointed forward to. Now as believer's who have trusted in Christ's work for us and turned from our sin, we no longer need a sacrifice for our ongoing fellowship with God, Christ was offered once for all. He has fulfilled the sacrificial system of the OT abolishing the need for sacrifices altogether. This has affected our worship and this is reflected here by Paul. We do not come to God with sacrifices, we bring ourselves. We are not offering ourselves in a type of suicide blood offering in payment for sin, no Christ's death has paid for all our sins, all that remains for us is the worship part.

Secondly, we must note that the word present is the key word that Paul is exhorting us to do. In other words, although we have been justified by faith, and adopted and set aside for holy service, we must still get on with presenting ourselves to God. This is not something that is done automatically but something we are to do. And we must note that it is something that we can now do because we have died to sin in our union with Christ. Some have come to this verse and tried to make it all about a one off crisis offering where we finally give everything to God, and that this will create a new beginning. Keswick theology and second blessing theology have promised joy, spiritual breakthrough and perfection from a once off offering. Paul is not hinting at anything like this in the text and this should be seen as an ongoing state of affairs not merely once off.

Thirdly, Paul calls us to present our bodies. In the first place we should recognise that our bodies is used by Paul as representative for all that we are body, soul and mind. It is as if Paul is calling for us to become a whole burnt offering as opposed to merely various parts being offered. Paul is repeating a point here that he made in 6:12-14, 'Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. 13 Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. 14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.' Paul again assumes that Christians are able to be holy on account of their union with Christ and expects every part of ourselves to be instruments for righteousness. Think about your lives. Are your minds presented to God or are they the playground of all sorts of evil fantasies and Godless worlds. We will have more to say on the importance of the mind in our next verse, but let it be stressed here that if your mind is not on God neither will the rest of your life be. Your mind determines the path of your life. What are you filling your mind with? Do you read your bible everyday, read Christian books and novels, listen to

Christian music, read Christian blogs? Do you come before God everyday in prayer to set your mind on its proper priorities? Is your mind offered to God today?

What about your eyes? Do you have a guard at the eyegate that inspects everything that goes in or are you a promiscuous and undiscerning watcher? Jesus tells us that if the eyes are dark the whole house is dark, in other words, what you let into your eyes will hold your heart.

What about your ears? How many hours are given to radio or music that has a worldview shaping effect? What about the gossip and slander you allow your ears to devour?

What about your tongue? Eph. 4:29, 'Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.'

Your hands? Eph. 4:28, 'Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.' 1 Thess. 4:11-12, 'and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.'

Your feet? Rom. 10:14-15, 'How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"'

Are you all given to God?

Fourthly, Paul calls upon us to present ourselves as a sacrifice and gives us three adjectives, living, holy and acceptable. Let's talk about being a living sacrifice. It is a striking picture, a paradoxical picture and that is why it is so effective it sticks in the mind. It is a sacrifice that is different to any other and meditating on it puts our worship into focus. It is harder to be a living sacrifice than a traditional sacrifice for various reasons.

Living sacrifices feel the pain. It is not a case of one quick cut of the throat and then it is over, it is the constant facing of ongoing pain. You have to choose to live for God against the pain of losing face as a teenager by doing the uncool thing in serving God, you have to choose to embrace the pains of social ostracism for not going with the crowd as a young adult, you have to choose the pain of choosing a life of holy living for your family in mid-life and the pain of ongoing service when everyone else is settling down in the retirement years. I remember as a young Christian filling out a spiritual gifts questionnaire and discovered I had the gift of martyrdom. I remember as a young Christian longing for a glorious end for Christ in some heroic gesture of self-sacrifice. But I remember how hard it was just to try and be holy every day and realised that being a living sacrifice is harder than martyrdom.

In traditional sacrifices if you were the sacrifice you would be led and restrained and killed. In being a living sacrifice it is very different, you are not led you volunteer; you are not dragged kicking and screaming and restrained you place yourself on the altar, and it is not someone else who pulls the trigger, you have to do it yourself. In this regard you are a little like Christ. You are not like Him that you are called to die for the forgiveness of another's sins, but in that you are both the offering and the one who has to be the offerer. What is going to give you the resolve to stay on the altar and not get off; what is going to enable you to pull out the hack saw and saw off your own offending limbs; what will keep you from being squeamish about taking a scalpel and cutting out your own spiritual cancer? The mercies of God! It is not, you better or you are going to go to hell, it is a case of look at what God has done for you, look at how much you have in Him, is it not your reasonable service to do this for Him?

One of the things that the language hides but we need to include is the great joy that comes from doing this. A heart that is regenerated to love holiness will willingly count the count in order to be holy and put away sin. A heart that has been recaptured for holiness will find true satisfaction not in the fleeting pleasures of sin but the ways of holiness no matter how costly. The language of sacrifice is appropriate to capture the difficulty because of the remaining indwelling sin within us that puts up a fight, but there is a willingness to do it, a power to do it, a the paradoxical joy found in giving not receiving in doing it.

Fifthly, the language of holy and acceptable also borrowed from the world of sacrifice is important to note. It is not the imputed holiness and acceptance that we find with God in order to be saved in Christ's righteousness. No this is not the holiness that saves but the holiness that we are saved to produced. It is not works that are as perfect and holy as Christ's and merit salvation and are so acceptable to God that we could offer them on their own to merit eternal salvation. No this holiness is the set apart life that is by the Spirit offered to God for the glory of Christ and produces the fruit of the Spirit which God finds acceptable and even pleasing. The act of being a living sacrifice is not a futile gesture that will never please God, we make real progress in Christ by His Spirit and He will one day say 'Good a faithful servant' to us.

Sixthly, this is our 'spiritual/reasonable worship.' The translation of this word is very hard, the word only occurs twice in the NT, here and in 1 Pet. 2:2 where it talks about the 'spiritual' milk of the Word. The word is literally 'logikon' from which we derive our word logical, hence the translation 'reasonable' which implies that the only fitting, logically consistent response to God's profound love to us is to offer ourselves to Him. But the word also has connotations of sincere or interior as opposed to superficial, hence spiritual meaning that we are to worship wholeheartedly. We need not choose both are true and necessary.

God has been more than good to you. His mercies are past counting and new every morning. He has given more than can ever be repaid. He has paid in value more than you can ever repay. He paid the debt of those who can never pay Him back. He took your hell, your death, your sin, your condemnation and alienation, and in exchange gives you a new creation, eternal life, righteousness, justification, adoption and makes you co-heirs with Him in eternal intimacy with the Trinity. Is it not fitting, logical that we offer our wholeselves? Is it not reasonable that we give Him our bodies in all their parts from the heart? This is how God calls us to repond in worship to what He has done in the gospel.