

A New Life Is Better Than A New Leaf. Romans 12:1-2

Little Johnny was being his normal disruptive self in Sunday School class so the teacher's aid took him out to the hallway to give him a "come to Jesus" talking to.

She asked, Johnny why do you think God put you in this world? Since Johnny continued sitting there sullenly quiet, she answered the question for him.

Johnny, the reason God put you in this world, is to serve others.

After a moment's silence, Johnny replied: "*Well, then, what are the OTHERS here for?*"

Let's admit it together, too often this has been our all-too-common response to life: "*what's in this for me?*" Or as Eliza's Dad explained to Professor Henry Higgins, "*The Good Lord God made man to help his neighbor ... but with a little bit of luck, when his neighbor calls, he won't be home.*"

What were we put here on Earth for?

That is the question that Romans, chapters 12-15 are about to answer – with very straightforward simple applications; so whether or not we are willing to follow the guidelines everyone of us should at least be able to answer the teacher's question: ***Why do you think God put you in this world?***

For today, we will just deal with the first two verses of Romans 12, which answers this question in a very neat summary. Then over the next several weeks we will work through these last chapters of Romans to unpack this truth into all areas of our life: home life, business life, civil life, even politics.

And since our young people are here with us in worship today, I have tried my hand at writing a better understood version of the first verse. Let's read it together.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters,
because of all God has given to you,
I plead with you to give yourself
completely back to Him, living the
holy life that He wants you to live.
This is your only reasonable way
to serve God. Romans 12:1 (*paraphrased*)

And now let's break this verse down into bite size pieces.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters,
because of all God has given to you,

*I appeal to you **therefore**, brothers and sisters,
by the **mercies** of God, (NRSV).*

As my English teacher told me, whenever you see the word "**therefore**," you had better find out what it is there for. Because the word "therefore" indicates that the writer has come to the conclusion and application portion of their argument. Therefore, because of everything that has written up to this point, now this is how the author expects you should respond.

And in this case, Paul's "**therefore**" takes in all that he has written to the Roman Church thus far (chapters 1-11). Here then is the grand conclusion to his most theological and evangelistic letter. Having explained that there is no distinction between Gentile and Jew, because God loves us all equally, and that He sent His son into the world to pay all our sinful debts, so that He could offer salvation freely to anyone and everyone who accepts it by faith. And with our faith now placed in God, he has freed us from enslavement to our sin, adopted us into his family, and through His indwelling Holy Spirit empowered us to live a holy life, sharing His Good News with the world; thus continuing His promise to bless all nations through Abraham.

All of this which God has done for us, Paul summarizes in the simple phrase: "**the mercies of God.**" All of which should provoke us to give an appropriately grateful response back to Him. It's like the Christmas presents. Having been given a gift, your gifter should expect some appropriate acknowledgement of our gratitude at having received the gift.

Such as the Pastor, who every Christmas, in the spirit of transparency, liked to publish a listing of all the gifts given to him by his parishioners. But, one year – while serving a Church that was divided over the matter of alcoholic consumption, some friends had given him a bottle of his favorite wine. So after some careful thought, he thanked them for *the gift of fruit ... and the spirit in which it was given.*

That word "therefore," is expecting an appropriate response of gratitude from you and me. As I said earlier, you may decide not to follow his advice, but Paul is convinced that because of all that God has done for you, what follows is the only appropriate, logical, reasonable, response that you can give back to him.

Speaking of our reasonable response, let's skip forward to the end of verse one for a bit of clarification for assertion. I translated this portion of verse one ...

This is your **only reasonable way to serve God.**

*which is your **spiritual worship.** (NRSV)*

Other translations have rendered this same phrase as *your spiritual worship, your true service, and your intelligent response.* I don't see what the confusion is all about, because in the Greek, what Paul actually wrote was "**this is your logical service.**" The Greek word he used was "logic" which has come into our modern world as the word "logic." And it still means what it meant then, which *is to reach an appropriate conclusion after following a rational thought process.*

Paul writes, that if we realize how much God has done for us (the before mentioned *mercies of God*) then our LOGICAL response would be to give our lives back to Him in His service. "Logical" implies that our only informed, carefully considered, and reasonable response to God would be to do what as has advised us. So in my best Spock imitation, I purse my hands together and say, that giving our lives back to God in His service is the only logical, the only reasonable way to thank Him.

So we now clearly understand three parts of this first verse.

1. **Therefore** ... Paul writes his next instructions to us to describe what should be our reasonable response in view of all that God has already done for us.
2. All of which Paul has summarized in the simple phrase: *the mercies of God.*
3. And if we think about all these mercies God has shown us, our only logical response would be to ...

give yourself completely back
to God, living the holy life
that He wants you to live.

*present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God, (NRSV)*

I wrote my translation this way, because There are some ideas here that no longer work in our modern minds. Let's start with this reference to "sacrifice." The NRSV Bible says, **present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God.** These days we use the word "sacrifice" to mean something you give up something of worth, which is a loss to

you, but hopefully for another's good. Thus a Baseball player might intentionally hit a sacrifice fly, knowing that it will get caught making him out at bat, but giving his teammate enough time to run in for a score. And we have all heard of parents who sacrifice everything for their children.

But Paul's day they knew exactly what a sacrifice was. It was an offering given to God as an act of worship, or thanksgiving, or in atonement for sin. It could be in a large amount of money paid or it could be farm produce such as wheat or living animals (doves, sheep, cattle); whatever it was, the gift was given in whole to be completely used up or burned up in honor of God. If it was an animal it was first killed, before it was sacrificed. So to be a sacrifice usually meant you had to die. But the last such sacrifice – the last giving up of a life - ever needing to be made was when Jesus gave up his life in atonement for our sins. While he trusted that his Father would one day raise him back to life, at the point of his death it was a complete and total sacrifice. Jesus died for you. But God did raise him from the dead to never die again and he has promised you and all who trust him that you also now have his same eternal life. Your body will one day physically die but you won't, you can't. Because the new life you have been given is guarded with, in, and through Jesus' life.

So if you wish to now give God a gift in an acknowledgement of all that He has done for you, then it has to be your living self, your life lived thereafter for the glory of God. And remember Paul says that if you realize what God has done for you, then giving your life back to live for him would be the only logical thing to do! We came across this thought earlier in our Roman studies?

present yourselves to God as those
who have been brought from death to life,
and present your members to God
as instruments of righteousness
Romans 6:13

So you have seen this idea before, in having been brought from death to life ... the most logical thing for you to do would be to live your life thereafter for God; use the life you are living as an offering of gratitude and worship. That is what Paul means by a **living sacrifice**.

And what Paul means by "bodies" and "members" (notice its plural, not "your body") is because he is not referring to your actual skin and bones but all the various parts of your world (what your life embodies): your education, your recreation, your occupation. It is only logical that you use your time, your energies, your devotion, your loyalties, in every world that you live in or move through as a sacrifice that you in gratitude give back to God. You were meant to serve others here for the Glory of God.

That is what Paul means by writing, ***present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God.*** I like my paraphrase better: *give yourself completely back to God, living the holy life that He wants you to live.*

If I could be crass for just a moment with a familiar phrase, “*don’t just give Jesus your heart. He wants more than that. He wants all of you.*” Which is a major issue for most Christians these days, because there are plenty of people willing to give Jesus their heart but they don’t want to give him anything else. Many people these days claim to be a follower of Christ, but they still want to live their own way, set their own direction, have their own priorities. They give Jesus their hearts for just an hour or two a week, at most; perhaps sing God a few songs, ask Him a few favors, leave a tip. But the rest of their lives they keep under their own rule. To which Paul would reply, “Don’t just give Jesus your heart, He wants all of you.” Gift every part of your life back to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” In view of what God has done for you, this is your only logical response.

John Calvin understood this logic in a very intense and personal way. He once wrote,

- *We are not our own; therefore, neither is our own reason or will to rule our acts and counsels.*
- *We are not our own; therefore, let us not make it our end to seek what may be agreeable to our carnal nature.*
- *We are not our own; therefore, as far as possible, let us forget ourselves and the things that are ours.*
- *On the other hand, we are God’s; let us, therefore, live and die to him.*
- *We are God’s; therefore, let his wisdom and will preside over all our actions.*
- *We are God’s; to him, then, as the only legitimate end, let every part of our life be directed.*

Right now you may be thinking “Well, that’s really nice, but John Calvin never had to do the things that I have to do.” However, if you knew his story you might change your mind. John Calvin, like Martin Luther was a former Catholic priest and a lawyer. He broke with the Catholic Church and began his protestant ministry as the pastor of a congregation in Geneva, Switzerland. But after 2½ years, the town fathers grew tired of Calvin, declaring that his ideas about the Christian life were too divisive, they invited him to leave town. So he went to Strasbourg to pastor a French-speaking congregation. And those people loved him. There his ministry flourished and began having a major continental impact for the Reformation. In Strasbourg, life for John Calvin was good.

Then he received a letter from the Geneva congregation saying, “John Calvin, you are needed back here in Geneva.” He wrote to his friend, and said, “*When I received that letter, I would have rather died than go back to Geneva, but I am not my own. I belong to God and therefore that is where I am going.*” And it was in Geneva that Calvin

changed the protestant world. It was also where he met and taught a fiery young Lutheran evangelist and former p.o.w. by the name of John Knox who would go on to become the founding pastor of the Church of Scotland, and all us Presbyterians.

So in verse one, Paul teaches that if we truly realize all that God has done for us, our only logical, reasonable response would be to now live our lives as a gift given back to Him. **Our sacrifice, our thank offering, to God is all of our life now lived for His glory**

Now in verse two, Paul goes on to explain how this holy and “acceptable to God” life can actually come about. Our New Revised Standard translation, reads this way: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* And this is not bad, but I have always loved the imagery of molding and re-molding that JB Philips used for this passage ...

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold,
but let God re-mold your minds from within,

so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good,
meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.
Romans 12:1-2 (JB Philips trans.)

You don't find them much anymore, but when I was a child I would often see sitting there in the mall, right beside the souvenir pressed penny machine, and the toy grabbing crane or claws would be a plastic animal molding machine. You put in your two quarters and these big pistons would push these two hollow metal molds together. Then the machine would squirt in some hot liquid and after a short cooling period the molds would open and out would pop a plastic dinosaur or horse that you had molded yourself. But that was all that machine could make. If you gave it two more quarters, it would give you another exact copy of the dinosaur/horse you had just made. If you wanted to make something else you had to find another machine.

And that is exactly what the world tries to do to every one of us, to every human that ever lived. The world has one single idea of what you should like, how you should dress, what you should think, even how you should vote. If you don't believe me, just watch t.v. for an hour and you will know exactly who has the meat, or the best pizza, or the smartest clothes, shoes, makeup to wear, and the best drugs to take for your “*afib not caused by a heart valve problem.*” The world, or should I say the ruler of this world also has only one idea for the running, or ruining, your spiritual life.

the god of this world has blinded
the minds of the unbelievers,
to keep them from seeing the light
of the gospel of the glory of Christ,
who is the image of God.

2 Corinthians 4:4

This is the only mold this world has, the idolization of personal freedom, personal happiness, personal comfort ... in other words, a hollow, cheaply made idol that looks just like you.

Those dinosaur/horse toys never lasted either. They looked nice and shiny right out of the machine. But being hollow inside and made of such cheap plastic, they were easily broken and soon tossed into the garbage. That is also true of the lives molded by this world: hollow, cheap, easily broken don't let the world trash you like that.

If you have been given a new life by Christ, he has broken you out of the world's molding machine and has given you the power to be everything you could possibly be – which you will only find when you live your life for God.

Don't let the world around you
squeeze you into its own mold,
but let God re-mold your minds from within,

*Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,*

Romans 12:2 NRSV

Just to show you why translations every now and then should get updated, notice that the JB Philips translation says *let God re-mold your minds from within* – which when you think about it is an impossibility: nothing can be re-MOLDED from within, but it can be rebuilt from the inside out, things can be transformed – all our various parts reworked into something new. Our kids understand such transformation, perhaps better than us, because they've grown up watching the Transformer movies, playing with Transformer toys (*sing - "Transformers! More than meets the Eye"*).

So to be transformed is to be completely changed from what you formerly were. The Bible talks a lot about how God through Jesus has already changed us, wants to continue changing us now, and one day will change us completely.

A scripture that we read last week, Ephesians 2 describes our first change; from what we were before we met Christ to what we have automatically become when we trust Christ (Ephesians 2: 11-22). It uses words such words as: you were *without Christ, aliens, strangers, far off [from God]*. Then, in Christ, you have been, *brought near, are at peace [with God], fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God.*

That is quite a transformation already, now here in Romans chapter 12, Paul urges us to keep the transformation going by **renewing our minds** -- that is getting the garbage that the world pushes out of our lives and beginning to put the good stuff in.

Unfortunately – and this is a hard thing to say – but renewing your mind will only be successful to the extent that you are willing stop watching t.v. and start spending more time reading your Bible. That really isn't a very fair competition is it? How easy it is just to sit there watching t.v. as it stuffs our heads full of the world's trash: the blatant and casual sexism, and consumerism, false values, and false ideals. Its all meant to program you to think in a certain worldly way ... I guess that's why they call them programs. Notice how quickly the Christmas perfume commercials have now been replaced by weight loss and exercise commercials, along with year-end car sales. And then, as we move into tax-refund season, you will start seeing furniture commercials. It's all so predictable because they trying to press you into the same mold. Don't let them do that again to you. You have been transformed, one day you will be fully transformed, but until that time you should be working at being transformed. If we know what we are going to become, why wait?

As the Apostle John wrote to us ...

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this:

*when [Jesus] is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is.
And all who have this hope in him
purify themselves, just as he is pure.
1 John 3:1-3*

Yes, the life that God wants you to live, the way God wants you to think is one that looks a lot like his own son Jesus. And one day we will – completely – so don't wait! Start now by daily asking "what would Jesus do?" and then doing so; soon it will just be the way you live.

so that you may prove in practice
that the plan of God for you is good,
and moves towards the goal of true maturity.

*so that you may discern what is the will of God
what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

You see God is not some big spoil sport out to rob you of your fun. He loves you too much to let you die outside of his family. And He proved His love to you by sending Jesus into this world to seek you out and save you. **So you can be sure that the life he wants you to live as His child is the best possible, most abundant life, you could live.** And God should know what that life would be, because He designed you and set you in this place and time for His purposes. He is already out there in your future watching as your life unfolds. Don't ask me how God does this, its one of those Star Trek time-space continuum mysteries. But God already knows what your best life could be, and you will only find that out if you begin to live your life for him. That's what Romans chapter 12, verse 2, says.

Which brings us to the end of today's message. So let's review what we have learned.

- Our only reasonable response to what God has already done for us – is to start living our life as a sacrifice, as a gift, to give back to Him.
- And we do this by refusing to let the world continue to mold us according to its trashy values. Instead we work at renewing our mind – by getting to know God better, through His word, and his family
- And if we do give our life back to Him, we will find that God's will for our life is what brings honor to him and makes us the happiest we could possibly be.

And why should we do all this that Paul is urging us to do?
Because it's the logical thing to do.

Let's pray.

Since Philip is out of the loop, here are some questions to aid your small group times together.

1. Paul says that the "mercies of God" toward us should compel us to want to now live our life for him. What are some of those "mercies" that God has given to us?
 - a. You might want to pick some out of the previous chapters of Romans.

- b. And also look in Ephesians 2:11-22 and one of my favorites: 1 Peter 2:1-10
2. How do you think you could live in all the various areas of your life (home, office, recreation) as a sacrifice – a gift given back to God.
 3. What are some of the ways that the world is trying to *squeeze you into its own mold*?
 4. And what are the ways that you can work at renewing, transforming, your life to find out what the best is that God would give you?
 5. And most importantly What is now stopping you from do so?