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Moved by the Mercies of God Romans 12:1-2

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that at no other time in the experience of the church in the 21st century has there been such an urgent, vital need for Christian holiness as there is right now. It grieves me to say this, but hardly a day passes that I don't either hear or read of another scandal, some scurrilous bit of news, be it financial or sexual or in some way related to spiritual abuse or bullying. And I'm not talking about what goes on in Hollywood or Las Vegas or on Wall Street. I'm talking about the professing Christian church. The effect of it all is to cast an ever-lengthening shadow over the integrity and purity of the evangelical body of Christ.

Something has to be done about it. And that something, very simply, is a return on the part of Christian men and women as well as, and perhaps especially, on the part of Christian leaders, to the pursuit of holiness and obedience to God's Word. To use the words in the passage before us today, it is high time that each of us once again presents our bodies as living, holy, acceptable sacrifices to God. It is high time that we all cease to be conformed to the fashion and shape and mindset and behavior of this world, and rather be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In a word, it is high time for holiness!

The Relationship between Doctrine and Duty

Before we turn our attention to the particulars of the text, I need to say something about the development of Paul's argument in Romans. It is here, in the transition from Romans 1-11 to Romans 12-16 that we see most explicitly the relationship between Christian doctrine and Christian duty. Anyone who reads Romans can easily see that beginning with Romans 12:1 the apostle Paul shifts theological gears. It is not as though he performs a biblical U-turn, as if with Romans 12-16 he leads us in another, contrary direction. Rather, what happens in these final five chapters is the unavoidable, organic fruit or inescapable product of what he has been saying in the first eleven chapters.

All will admit that Romans 1-11 contain perhaps the deepest, most dense, complex, and at times mind-bending treatment of theological truths to be found anywhere in the Bible. And it is from those lofty, elevated heights of big, expansive thoughts about God and what he has done for us in Jesus that Paul now descends into the muck and mire and rigorous realities of daily Christian living. We see much the same transition in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Following the challenging theological assertions in Ephesians 1-3, Paul launches Ephesians 4-6 by saying, "I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1).

Both in Ephesians and Romans, then, Paul moves **from exposition to exhortation**. It is a transition **from principles to practices, from doctrines to duty, from the credenda, or what we believe, to the agenda**, or how we are to behave. Some have explained the difference by using the words **indicative and imperative**. The indicative is the statement of fact, the declaration of the good news of the gospel. The imperative is the exhortation to respond, the call to now live in a way that is consistent with the truth of the gospel.

But why did Paul do it this way? Or better still, why did the Holy Spirit, through Paul, do it this way? Why is it not the other way around? Why not first duty and then doctrine? The reason, I believe, is quite simple. All behavior, all human activity, is done for a reason. There is always an underlying motive for what we do. Some people live in a particular fashion out of a desire for fame. Others desire to project an image of moral superiority, while still others live as they do in hope that their deeds will put God in their debt and obligate him to treat them in a particularly good and prosperous way.

But Christian obedience that is consistent with Scripture is always theologically motivated. We do what we do because God did what he did. We don't obey to gain God's favor, but because we already have it. You've heard me say this before: the biblical Christian life is not one characterized by an "if/then" relationship with God, but a "because/therefore" relationship. Many try to be holy thinking that "if" they are "then" God will love them, then God will bless them. But the biblical order of life is that "because" God has loved and blessed us in Christ Jesus that "therefore" we happily and freely commit our lives to his honor and praise.

Because God has been merciful to me in Jesus, this is how I choose to conduct myself at home. Because God has been merciful to me in Jesus, I will live righteously and humbly in the office. Because God has been merciful to me in Jesus, I will refrain from using language that might dishonor God or offend another man or woman. Because God has been merciful to me in Jesus, I will be generous with my time and money. Simply put, all that are and do and say and think is based on something, in this case, the mercy of God as shown us in Jesus Christ.

If God has not done for us, in Christ Jesus, what Paul in Romans 1-11 has said he has done, then nothing in Romans 12-16 is of any importance at all. Ignore it. Make up your own rules for life. Or throw away all rules completely. Decide for yourself what is good and what is evil. If, on the other hand, you know that Romans 1-11 describes what God has graciously and freely and sovereignly and mercifully done for you, you will thirst for godliness and your passion for purity will be unquenchable.

I do not understand, and never will, how preachers can stand before congregations week in and week out and call them to live a certain way and to avoid specific sins without grounding their appeal in the truths of biblical theology. ***Ethical exhortation, untethered to theological exposition is little more than the spouting of pious platitudes and moralisms that ultimately don't do anyone any good at all.*** So if you are tempted to say, "Sam, for heaven's sake, forget about Romans 1-11 and just tell us what to do," you've come to the wrong church. Well, actually, you came to precisely the church you need most!

One more thing. If you ever seek to obey the sorts of commands that follow in Romans 12 or any of the other commands and exhortations in Scripture and do so independently of the theological foundation and source of strength, you will ultimately end up either profoundly frustrated or you will become a legalist. And both of those are bad!

God's Mercy as the Motivation for Christian Obedience (v. 1a)

So, what exactly are the "mercies" of God? Is there a difference between God's grace and his mercy? Yes, but only a slight one. Grace contemplates sinners as guilty, while mercy views them as wretched. Grace is God's attitude of kindness when what we deserve is death, while mercy is divine pity for those who are utterly helpless and hopeless. But we shouldn't drive too big of a wedge between them. They are two sides of the same coin.

The "mercies of God" mentioned here in v. 1 are God's saving deeds described in Romans 1-11. His love for hell-deserving sinners, his justification of those who by his power put their faith in Jesus, his election of us before the foundation of the world, his calling of us into his presence, his adoption of us as sons and daughters, his sanctifying presence and power through the indwelling Holy Spirit, these together constitute the "mercies" of God! Paul will later make it clear that your entire, all-consuming purpose in life is to glorify God for his mercy. He writes this in Romans 15:8-9,

"For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom. 15:8-9).

That is why my aim in preaching through these first eleven chapters in Romans has been to drive home deeply into your heart and soul and mind and affections the magnitude of God's mercy toward you in

Christ Jesus. So, what difference does it make? What should our response be? What will our lives look like in the light of God's saving and gracious mercy?

The "presentation" of your life (v. 1)

We should not overlook the spirit or attitude in Paul's urgent appeal. It is seen in two words he uses: "appeal" and "brothers" (v. 1a). The word "appeal" could also be translated "urge" or "beseech". This is an authoritative summons that Paul believes is incumbent on every Christian. But there is also tenderness in his appeal, as Paul speaks as a Christian brother to other Christian "brothers" and sisters. Paul is no less responsible to heed the call to holiness than we are.

The word translated "present" is not new to us in Romans. Paul made use of it in Romans 6:13, 16, and 19 where he warned us not to "present" our bodies as instruments for unrighteousness but to "present" ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life. The word as used here in Romans 12:1 carries the notion of a presentation or offering up of a sacrifice (see Lev. 1:3-17). In the Old Testament a worshiper would bring a bull or a pigeon or a lamb as an offering to God. But no such sacrifice is required in the New Covenant, as Christ has presented or offered himself for us. Our "sacrificial offering" today is a response to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We don't make this offering to secure God's favor or forgiveness, but because we already have it!

There is also a difference between being asked to "yield" or "surrender" your bodies, on the one hand, and being encouraged to "present" yourself. The terms "yield" and "surrender" both imply a certain reluctance or hesitancy that must be overcome. The word "present" on the other hand implies a glad, happy, willing offering of oneself. If I say to Ann on our anniversary, "Sweetheart, I yield this gift to you" or "I surrender this up to you," she is not going to be impressed with my love for her. Our presentation of our bodies to God as a sacrifice for his glory, just like my presentation of a gift to my wife, is to be a joyous, glad, willing, and voluntary act.

"Bodies"

Why does Paul mention our "bodies"? What about our minds and hearts and worldly possessions? Paul undoubtedly is using the word "bodies" here in a comprehensive, wholistic way. It includes the totality of who we are. It's Paul's way of saying, "God wants **you!** He doesn't merely want a gift. He wants the **giver!**" Sadly, some believers think of the Christian life as exclusively spiritual or immaterial in nature. But our bodies are just as important. Our bodies have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and are the temple or dwelling place of the Spirit. Our bodies will be fully redeemed, glorified, and raised to life in the new heavens and new earth. So never forget that your body belongs to God no less so than your spirit.

Some of you probably flinched when you heard Paul refer to your body as that which you are to offer to God. You don't like your body. You consider yourself overweight or underweight, wrinkled, unattractive, disabled, perhaps increasingly hard of hearing and stiff and brittle and subject to all manner of pain. But our bodies are significant and important to God not because of what they look like or because of how they feel but because of how we make use of them to serve and obey and honor and worship God. Don't ever forget that when Christ Jesus was most beautiful, at the time of his suffering and crucifixion for us, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:2-3). "The beauty of Christ is the beauty of love, not the beauty of looks. His beauty was the beauty of sacrifice, not skin" (Piper).

Thus, to "present" your "bodies" unto God means that you consecrate and dedicate everything you are, body, soul, spirit, mind, heart, will, emotions in such a way that God is seen to be glorious and great. You may remember Paul's commitment and what wrote to the Philippians while in prison: "It is my eager expectation and hope that . . . Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Phil. 1:20). So, I urge you never again to think of yourself as if you were your own. You don't belong to yourself. You

have no right to anything in your body, mind, spirit, will, or emotions. You are God's property. He bought you with the price of his son's blood on the cross. "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own," said Paul, "for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

What kind of "sacrifice" (v. 1b)

Paul describes this offering of ourselves to God as a sacrifice that is "living," "holy," and "acceptable to God." Let's look at each of these in turn.

First, it is a "living" sacrifice, one that does not die or have a temporary shelf life. The presentation of ourselves to God is wholistic and perpetual. There is no time limit. Paul may also have in mind what he said back in Romans 6:11, 13 where he spoke of believers as "alive to God in Christ Jesus." Second, it is to be a "holy" sacrifice. By "holy" he means that you and I are set apart for God, consecrated exclusively for him and his glory. Third, this must be a sacrifice that is "acceptable" to God. Perhaps a better rendering of this word is "well pleasing" to God. The devotion and dedication of our selves to God is pleasing to him, it brings him pleasure.

What we are and present to God is "spiritual worship"

The word translated "worship" is the same word used back in Romans 9:4 where Paul said one of the blessings experienced by Israel was "the worship," a likely reference to all the activities and sacrifices offered up in the Temple. When we present ourselves to God, we are worshiping him! But what kind of worship does he mean?

The word translated "spiritual" is the Greek word from which we get our English term, *logical*. It may be that he is saying our worship is reasonable, wholehearted. Some have suggested it means appropriate, rational, perhaps even fitting the circumstances, worship that makes sense in view of the way God has treated us so mercifully in Christ Jesus. But I think the word "spiritual" better captures the idea Paul had in mind. Our worship is never to be mechanical, merely external, or automatic, or purely an act of ritual. It is genuine and flows from within our hearts and spirits.

We mistakenly think worship is only singing. It is assuredly singing, but it is everything we are and do and offer up to God to bring honor to his name. There is a sense in which worship is all of life! It is stunned silence at the majesty of God. It is loud shouting in exuberant joy because of the mercy of God. It is humble kneeling, knowing that God is holy. It is heartfelt adoration that flows from a broken, but now redeemed soul. It is sincere gratitude for all the gifts of God. Simply put, we are to make use of our bodies, which is to say, the totality of who we are, to display the worth of God and all that he is for us in Christ. But this worship that Paul has in mind is especially seen in what he then commands us to do in v. 2.

The Renewal of our Minds

Be aware that Paul does not intend for us to rigidly separate our "bodies" (v. 1) from our "minds" (v. 2). He views us wholistically. Our bodies include our minds. Our "bodies," as noted, is simply a way of being exhaustive and all-encompassing. If there is a distinction here, and I'm not persuaded there is, it is simply between what we believe and how we behave.

There is a two-fold responsibility that is ours. First, we are to resist and defy and push back against any tendency to conform to this world. Before we go any further let me point out that Paul is not saying we should deliberately and arrogantly break the rules of society or violate the customs of order and decorum and common courtesy. This isn't a call to be a social misfit. That would be much too easy. The apostle has something far more profound in mind. As we'll see, his focus is ethical and moral and concerns our values, priorities, and how they affect all of life.

The term “world” more literally means “age,” a reference to the world or society or culture in which we live that is dominated by sin and unbelief and idolatry and immorality. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul refers to Satan as “the god of this age.” Thus, the contrast in mind is between this present, temporary, corrupt, Satanically shaped “age” in which we live and the beauty and righteousness of the “age” to come. There are forces in our world, largely demonic in nature, that are constantly seeking to change the way you think and act. It is relentless and intense. You will never escape the presence of this power to conform, but you can resist it. As John reminds us, “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

The pressure to conform comes in many expressions. There is the constant appeal to join the crowd, to do whatever is necessary to be accepted and respected. There is the incessant lure of monetary gain. If you yield to the pressure to live and think like everyone else, there is the promise of more money and prestige and promotion. To resist conformity comes with the threat of demotion or cancellation. The inescapable temptation to be liked and praised exerts pressure on our souls to cut corners when it comes to sexual morality or financial integrity. So, when people watch how you live and listen to how you talk and observe the way you treat others, especially those who mistreat you, do they see anything different from what they see when they look at the average, unregenerate, unbeliever?

But that is only one half of the story. It isn't enough to stand firmly against the pressures of our culture to look like it and act like it and speak like it. We must, in a more positive vein, “be transformed.” Transformation can be either negative or positive. You can experience transformation from what you know God wants you to be into whatever your peers or colleagues or social circles demand from you. That is what Paul has just said we must resist. There is also, positively speaking, progressive transformation into what God wants us to be, namely, more and more like Jesus. And this transformation is never merely outward or physical. It is primarily inward and spiritual. Paul isn't talking about some superficial resemblance but an inward renewal that affects all aspects of life. But it begins with the “mind.”

The word translated “transformed” is used in the NT in only two other texts. It is found in Matthew 17:2 where Jesus is said to have been “transfigured” in the presence of his disciples. More directly relevant is Paul's use of it in 2 Corinthians 3:18 where he describes Christians as being “transformed” into the image of Jesus Christ. Here Paul uses it to refer to the reconfiguration of our thought processes, a remodeling of the furniture in our brains, a metamorphosis, if you will, in what we know to be true and what we value as of greatest importance.

This “nonconformity” to the world that Paul has in view does not primarily mean the avoidance or rejection of worldly behaviors. Certainly, that would be included. But simply choosing not to live like the world is not what it means to be “transformed.” The transformation Paul mentions is not merely the exchange of one set of daily habits for another set. As John Piper has said, “The Christian alternative to immoral behaviors is not a new list of moral behaviors. It is the triumphant power and transformation of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ — our Savior, our Lord, our Treasure. So, transformation is a profound, blood-bought, Spirit-wrought change from the inside out.”

There are several other important things to note here. First, Paul uses the Greek present tense, most likely to emphasize the on-going, continuous experience of being changed. This isn't a one-time incident. No one experiences complete eradication of sin in a singular act of dedication. Second, the verb is passive. Paul does not say we transform ourselves but that we are to be transformed, undoubtedly by the work of the Holy Spirit. Third, the verb is imperative. This is a command. This is not optional. God isn't giving us a choice either to be transformed or not. Not to experience this transformation is, therefore, a sin. Fourth, Paul does not want us to think of merely substituting one outward fashion for another. What he calls for is a deep, internal metamorphosis that is expressed in a distinct and decidedly Christ-like outward lifestyle.

This may sound harsh, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. You and I are largely useless in our commitment to exalt Jesus Christ if our lives are largely conformed to the world around us and its values. There are

two and only two options. Either we are conformed to this world or to Christ. What will it be? All well and good, you say. But precisely how is this to happen?

What's Wrong with our "Minds"?

The transformation in view is one that is primarily mental. The key to holy living is in the mind. Contrary to what many have suggested, your "sinful flesh" is your enemy, not your "mind". And the only hope for conquering that sin is through a gradual and Spirit-empowered transformation of your mind. Your mind only becomes your enemy when you allow it to be shaped and fashioned and conformed to the beliefs and values of the surrounding culture. But Christ has redeemed our minds to be shaped and used for his glory.

But why does the "mind" need renewal? What's wrong with our minds? I don't think Paul is saying that our problem is one of varying levels of IQ, as if smarter people are for that reason more holy and less in need of transformation. Merely gaining more knowledge about the world and storing up useless trivial facts is not what Paul has in mind. Education is critical if we hope to make an impact on our world, but education alone is certainly not what the word "transformation" means in this passage. You can be the most intelligent person on the planet with an IQ of 175 and still be conformed to the world and totally miss out on what Paul is saying. Some of the most brilliant people in society are among the most wicked and defiant.

Look at similar language from Paul in Ephesians 4:23. There he exhorts us "to be renewed in the spirit" of our "minds" (Eph. 4:23). Your "mind" is more than a mental computer. It has a "spirit" or a mindset or a demeanor or a complex array of values and viewpoints. You not only know certain things, you value or cherish them, or conversely, hate and despise them. And the problem with our minds, the reason they need constant transformation, is not so much because we are of average intelligence or tend to forget things. The problem is that our minds are fallen, and apart from God's grace we use them to disbelieve God and to defy him. We are born into this world with a bent or mental disposition to oppose God and to view virtually anything in this world as of greater value than the Creator himself.

If you doubt what I'm saying, listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 4:17-19. Here he describes the natural condition of fallen humanity apart from the renewal that comes from the Holy Spirit:

"Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity" (Eph. 4:17-19).

This is why our minds need to be renewed! The only other place in the NT where this word "renewal" appears is in Titus 3:5. There Paul refers to "the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." If our minds are to be renewed, going back to school for yet another degree isn't the answer. We can only experience this when the Spirit sovereignly reshapes and fashions our thoughts and values and beliefs. And he does this primarily through the instruction of Scripture. This is why at Bridgeway we focus on unpacking and explaining and applying the inerrant Word of God. But don't be misled. You can sit here every Sunday and listen attentively and underline your Bible and follow along in my notes and still not experience the renewal of your mind. You must cry out to the Holy Spirit to make use of the truths of God's written Word to transform how we think and believe and live.

I should also mention the negative side of this transformation. It's one thing to fill your mind and heart with Spirit-enlightened truth. But of what good is that if you continue to fill your mind with vile images and sexual perversion and filthy talk and all the trash that you ingest from TV, Netflix, and social media? You experience this transformation by shutting off, as much as is possible, all corrupting influences. Monitor carefully what you read, the music you listen to, the movies you watch, and the people with whom you associate in close friendship. The alternative is found in Philippians 4:8 and Colossians 3:1-4.

Discerning the Will of God

Paul is not saying that we should labor to determine if God's will is good or bad. It is always good. Nothing is better. Rather, he means we learn of the goodness and the acceptable nature of this perfect will by experience. Both ideas of "prove" and "approve" are involved. Not only do I discern the will of God, but I like it. To discern what is the will of God means that I detect it. But there is also the idea of embracing and delighting in it. Ok, but what does Paul mean by "the will of God"?

He's not talking about the sovereign, secret will of God. What God has determined in eternity past to come to pass is not something he has revealed to us. It is, by definition, secret and hidden. God does not intend for us to know most of his sovereign will ahead of time. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us" (Deut. 29:29). "If you want to know the future details of God's will of decree, you don't want a renewed mind, you want a crystal ball. This is not called transformation and obedience; it's called divination, soothsaying" (Piper).

Thus, God's "will" here is primarily what he has revealed to us in Scripture: its commands and prohibitions. But there is also God's "will" for our lives when we face complex moral challenges and decisions to which Scripture does not explicitly speak. Who am I to marry? Where should I live? What career path should I pursue? What car should I purchase? Where should I go to school? What movies should I watch? How should I spend my money? And on and on the list goes. To have a mind renewed by the Holy Spirit and in tune with the truth of Scripture and its principles and values, enables us to discern how God wants us to act in any and all circumstances.

In conclusion I simply want to ask: Are you moved by God's mercies? Are you willing to offer up all that you are to God as an act of worship? Is your mind being gradually and graciously transformed so that you think like God would want you to think, so that you value what he values, so that you cherish what he cherishes? This is what it means to be a Christian. This is what it means to be the object of God's magnificent and majestic mercies in Jesus Christ.