

More than Skin and Bones

Becoming a Non-Conformist – Part I

Romans 12:1a

Introduction

I read in the news some time ago, about a man who was receiving a lot of attention for his unusual sacrifice. In fact, his selfless act was creating quite a bit of notoriety. He was being called, by local media, “a hero”.

The reason Rob Smitty was at the receiving end of so much congratulation and attention was that he willingly donated one of his kidneys to a perfect stranger. According to news reports, Rob said that his motivation for doing something like this was that it would make his children proud.

The trouble was, his ten year old daughter was not impressed by his sacrifice. Amber said her father never came to see her and her mother, Rob’s former wife; he never called, not even on her birthday. Amber said, “I don’t think my father’s much of a hero.”

The case took an interesting turn as public documents showed that Rob had not made child support payments to Amber’s mother in nearly a year.

Can you imagine? Giving one of your kidneys to a perfect stranger in need, while failing to provide for the needs of your own child?

It is really not all that remarkable. In fact, it is classic human nature. We like to define where we will act right, how we will look good, and what we will look like to whom and at what time, while at the same time, avoiding the hard truth about ourselves. Making a good impressions can be accomplished from a distance, but authenticity is proven up close.

As we prepare to dive into the truths of Romans, chapter 12, I need to warn you that it will absolutely remove the ability to make a good impression – to ourselves, to others, and most importantly, to God. Paul is now after the reality of Christianity.

In the first eleven chapters of Romans, it is possible for all of us to say, “Yea, I believe all that stuff. If you want to talk about justification by faith, condemnation, original sin, eternal hell and heaven, forgiveness by grace, God’s wrath, election, evangelism, we can talk! I’m right there with you! I agree; I’m all over it!”

However, Paul is not really going to talk so much anymore about what we believe. He is going to talk about how we behave. Paul is going to move from doctrinal education into doctrinal application; from principle to practice.

In chapter 12, Paul does nothing less than define authentic Christianity. It is a chapter that tests us, not at a safe distance, but up close. It is one of those chapters that looks at our character, not through a telescope, but through a microscope. It is not for the faint of heart. It is not the chapter of choice for the average “Sunday-go-to-meetin” Christian.

As Paul defines true Christianity, we will discover all over again, much to our discomfort, that it is more than words; it is more than a creed; it is more than the sinner’s prayer, baptism, and church membership. And, it is more than an act of sacrifice toward a perfect stranger.

Authentic Christianity

I find it interesting, as we look at verse 1 of Romans, chapter 12, that the only vocabulary Paul can use to capture the essence of Christianity is the language of sacrifice and transformation. Paul begins with characteristic passion.

Therefore . . .

In other words, on the basis of everything Paul previously revealed in his letter to the Romans, not just in what we call chapter 11, but from the very beginning when Paul defined himself as a slave of Christ Jesus.

Therefore . . .

Paul is saying, “On the basis of all you have learned about God, here is how you should live for God.”

Paul writes,

Therefore I urge you, brethren . . .

The word “urge” can be translated, “beg,” or “appeal to,” or “plead with”.ⁱ

Would you notice that Paul does not say, “Now listen, in light of everything you’ve learned, I think it would be terrific if you tried to live for Christ . . . it’d be kinda nice if you gave it your best shot.”

No. He is saying, “I plead with you, brethren, . . .”

. . . to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice . . .

Two observations about Paul’s request

Before we get too far along, let me give two observations about Paul’s passionate request.

Authentic Christian living is motivated by gratitude, not guilt

1. First, authentic Christian living is motivated by gratitude, not guilt.

Paul writes,

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God . . .

Paul is saying, “Listen brethren, in view of all that God has given us; in light of the grace of God toward us; because of everything God has provided for us, do the only thing you should do – give Him your life.”

The only fitting response to the gifts that God has given to us is to give the gift of ourselves back to

God. In fact, not only is this the motivation for Christian living, it is the secret to Christian victory.

God has given to us everything that we need, pertaining to life and godliness. We do not need anything more from God.

Throughout his letter to the Romans, in fact, Paul has revealed mercies from God. These include:

- the peace of God (1:7);
- the power of the gospel (1:16);
- the kindness and longsuffering of God toward us (2:4);
- a right standing before God (3:21-22);
- the forgiveness of every sin – past, present, and future (4:7-8);
- the hope in God’s glory (5:2);
- the love of God poured out in our hearts (5:5);
- the Holy Spirit (5:5);
- justification by the blood of Christ (5:9);
- salvation from the wrath of God (5:9);
- reconciliation with God (5:10);
- the gift of eternal life (6:23);
- the freedom to bear fruit for God (7:4);
- membership in the family of God (8:14);
- security in our salvation (8:38-39);
- mercy from God (9:23);
- the good news of the gospel (10:17);
- and more.

God has given us everything.

That is why Paul does not begin this chapter on the subject of Christian behavior by saying, “Now there’s one more thing you need to receive from God.”

Authentic Christian living is not about receiving from God, but giving back to God.

Now do not misunderstand this. Let me say it in this way:

Being saved is when we receive everything from God.

Being a sacrifice is when we give everything to God.

Salvation is God’s gift to us.

Being a living sacrifice is our gift to God.

Therein, in fact, lies the secret to victorious Christian living. It is not God doing, or saying, or giving anything more to us – He has already done, said, and given us all that we need.

Now it is our turn to give to Him. And Paul makes the point very clearly that we give to Him, motivated not by getting anything more, but by the fact that we have already gotten it all.

Being a living sacrifice is not about getting more from God, but giving our all to God.

The question is, “What motivates your Christian experience?”

Is your motivation from a sense of obligation? Is it bribery; that is, so that you will get something from God? Is it guilt? Is it fear?

The basis of Christian living, according to Paul’s very first words, is not obligation, or bribery, or guilt, or fear – it is gratitude. He says,

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by [because of] the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living . . . sacrifice . . .

Let me make another observation about Paul’s passionate request.

Authentic Christian living is not partial surrender, it is total

2. Authentic Christian living is not partial surrender, it is total.

Paul writes,

. . . present your bodies . . .

Literally, this means to, “present your entire being”.

One translation reads, “present all your faculties”. Another reads, “present your whole being to God”.

Paul is thinking of more than skin and bones. He has in mind the fact that we live in our bodies and our bodies represent everything we have to offer. Inside the body is our mind, our intellect, our emotions, our plans, our will, our dreams, our thoughts, our desires, our hopes, our frustrations, our disappointments, our longings, everything.

I lay on the altar and offer up to You my hopes, my longings, my disappointments, my will, my emotions, my intellect, my plans . . . everything, I sacrifice to You!

By the way, this text implies you can refuse.

You might think, “But surely God can command us; surely He will force us!”

Oh, but over and over again, the matter of Christian conduct is our responsibility before God.

In the Old Testament, the believer chose to bring a sacrifice to God. In the New Testament, the believer chooses to be the sacrifice to God.

I do not know about you, but I think it would be much easier to make a sacrifice than to be the sacrifice.

I like the story of the farmer who went into the barn and asked his animals to contribute something for his breakfast. The hen clucked of what a great idea that was and produced two fresh eggs. The cow thought it was great and said he would provide the milk. They then looked at the reluctant pig, “Well, aren’t you going to give something for our dear farmer?”

The pig responded, “That’s easy for you to say. For you, it’s a minor contribution; for me, it’s total commitment!”

We do not mind temporary contributions that can be replaced, but our attitude is a lot different when the contribution is:

- to present to God something that He may not give back;
- to yield something to Him that He may never again let us control;
- to offer something to Him that He may never replace.

Francis Havergal, who wrote what she called, her hymn of consecration, came to a crossroads in her life. She had been a believer for decades, but knew there were places in her heart and life she did not want God to have. She wrote that one day, as if it were a shock of electricity to her mind, she realized that she must sacrifice every corner of her life to her Lord. She wrote, and I quote, “I realized there must be full surrender before there can be satisfaction.”ⁱⁱ

We have been singing her hymn of consecration for around one hundred fifty years. It is Romans, chapter 12, verse 1, put to poetry.

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.

Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.

Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.

Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure store.

Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.

Three ways Paul describes the offering

Now, you need to know that Paul is not suggesting that we give God just any offering. He describes the offering three ways.

It is alive

1. First, it is alive (priority of life).

Therein lies the problem. Offerings on altars were typically not breathing. That is how the Jews and Gentiles of Paul's day would comprehend the concept of an offering.

However, Paul says that God does not want a *lifeless* offering; He wants a *live* offering.

. . . present your bodies a living . . . sacrifice . . .

As Howard Hendricks put it, "The trouble with being alive is that we're constantly wanting to crawl down off the altar."

A *living sacrifice* is a reference to the perpetual nature of our offering to God. This is the offering of every day to God, not just the Sabbath.

This kind of offering moves us beyond salvation. It goes beyond Sunday!

It is holy

2. Secondly, it is a holy sacrifice.

Paul adds to the description,

. . . present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice . . .

Just as the Old Testament believer would bring an offering to God that was unblemished, so Paul uses the analogy to urge the believer to live a pure life.

The word for "holy" is used in the Old Testament for the Holy place and the Holy of Holies. In the New Testament, the believer is informed of the rather stunning news that *he* is now the Holy of Holies.

Paul wrote, in I Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 16,

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

Peter refers to us, in I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9, as a holy priesthood.

Paul had already written earlier, in Romans, chapter 6, verse 13,

. . . do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

By the way, the Greek word for "holy" is the same root word that gives us the word "saint". Over and over again, the apostles refer to the believers as saints.

This is not something you acquire by the vote of some council, it is something you were made by the grace of God. And it is not something you become sometime after you die, "saint" is a term used to refer to a believer who is alive.

Paul wrote:

- *To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae . . .* (Colossians 1:2);
- *. . . To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi . . .* (Philippians 1:1);
- *. . . to those who . . . [are] saints by calling . . .* (I Corinthians 1:2).

We *are* saints already; that is, we are already set apart unto God as His redeemed people. Paul is only saying in Romans, chapter 12, verse 1, that we should live like it. In other words, we *are* saints – now, *act* like saints!

You either act like a saint or you do not act like a saint – on the basketball court, in the boardroom, in

the shop, in the lunchroom, on a date, with a client, on the golf course, on the campus, in the dorm room.

We are to act like a saint. The only way we can is to present our bodies to Christ. These are His feet, His hands, His ears, His eyes.

It is acceptable (well pleasing) to God

3. Thirdly, when you make that kind of sacrifice to God, Paul writes further in verse 1 of Romans, chapter 12, it is acceptable or well pleasing to God.

. . . present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable [well pleasing] to God . . .

God accepts the offering of our day with pleasure.

Is God pleased? Well, what have you placed on the altar? How extravagant is your gift?

When I proposed marriage to my college sweetheart, a few years ago now, I had a ring tucked behind the lamp in the room where I planned to pop the question and offer her everything I could imagine and anything else I could think of. When she opened the ring box, do you think for a moment that the ring I had for her was one of those plastic jobs you can get out of the bubble gum machine at Food Lion? Any old ring would do, right?

Are you kidding? I needed all the help I could get! I got the most extravagant ring I could afford – and begrudged the fact that the diamond was so small. I was, in effect, presenting myself to her.

When she accepted my proposal, after some persuasion, we prepared for the wedding.

The day arrived, and she came down the aisle wearing, oh, you know – whatever she could find in the closet that morning that was white. Any old dress would do, right?

Are you kidding? It was regal, feminine, a beautiful dress she had chosen to communicate her heart in being presented to me.

Now, the ring I had selected pleased her and the presentation of her in that wedding gown certainly pleased me – and that was our objective.

Paul writes, “Listen, brethren, present this kind of offering to the Lord – the sacrifice of daily living; the sacrifice of a holy life – God will be pleased, and that is the ultimate objective.”

The question a living sacrifice asks is not, “Am I well pleased?” but, “Is God well pleased?”

Two final observations of Romans 12:1a

Let me give two final observations from the first half of this great text, Romans, chapter 12, verse 1a.

Jesus Christ is inviting the believer to sacrifice everything without negotiating the terms of surrender

1. Jesus Christ is inviting the believer to sacrifice everything without negotiating the terms of surrender.

That is the funny thing about sacrifices – they automatically give up the right to negotiate altars. We do not determine where they are located; how comfortably they are built; what the conditions are that surround them.

Presenting yourself to God means your life is out of your hands. An extravagant offering comes with no strings attached.

That is more like Jacob, the manipulator who followed after God with all kinds of strings attached. In Genesis, chapter 28, while on the run from Esau, his twin brother, that he had tricked out of the family inheritance, Jacob prayed to God and said, “Lord, if You will be with me on this journey and bring me back safely and give me food to eat and clothing to wear, then You will be my God.”

Then Jacob added, “I’ll take this boulder, here on the ground, and I’ll set it up as a pillar and dedicate it as God’s house.”

In other words, “This boulder, Lord, will be a monument to Your faithfulness.”

That is so generous of Jacob, isn’t it?

He says, “Lord, I’ll dedicate this rock and the ground around it as Your temple; this will be Your special spot.”

I am sure God was thinking, “Wow – I get that rock! Am I lucky to have Jacob, or what?”

The quality of the gift reveals the value of the recipient to the giver.

Let me put it this way: the quality of your life sacrifice to God, reveals what you think of God.

Will any old dress do? Will any old ring be good enough?

Jesus Christ is not asking the believer, “Who will die for Me?” He is asking, “Who will live for Me?”

2. Jesus Christ is not asking the believer, “Who will die for Me?” He is asking, “Who will live for Me?”

You can die a martyr’s death, in one heroic act of faith. Many heroes of the faith have done just that.

God, most likely, will not call most of us to that kind of death. But He is calling us to that kind of life!

Frankly, there are many Christians who might even be willing to win the martyr’s crown; who are willing and eager to die for Jesus Christ. How many, though, are just as eager to live for Christ?

Living for Christ can be mundane; ordinary; routine. I love the little poem that reads:

*To live above with the saints we love,
That will be grace and glory,
But to live below with the saints we know,
Well, that’s another story.*

Ladies and gentlemen, God is not calling you to die a martyr’s death and go to heaven; He is calling you to live a martyr’s life on earth.

Conclusion

Paul is not inviting you to a life of deliverance, but to a life of dedication – knowing that deliverance will one day come. Until then, we say to our Lord, “Because of Your mercies toward me, can I do anything other than give my entire being to You?”

May I live daily for You, holy and set apart, not for my glory and not for my pleasure, but for Yours alone?”

Living sacrifices have been praying like that in every generation. Will you pray like that in your generation?

Pray like John Wesley, one of the pioneer leaders in the Great Awakening, who often put his life on the line for the cause of Christ. He wrote, sometime in the late 1800’s, this prayer of total consecration to his Lord:

*I am no longer my own, but Thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom
thou wilt;
Put me to doing, put me to sufferings;
Let me be employed by Thee or laid aside for
Thee,
Exalted for Thee or brought low for Thee.
Let me be full; let me be empty;
Let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and heartily yield all things to Thy
pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Thou art mine, and I am Thine.
Amen.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/27/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker Book House, 1989), p. 198.

ⁱⁱ Robert J. Morgan, Then Sings My Soul (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), p. 191.