

Called to New Life in Christ

Bible Background • ROMANS 12

Printed Text • ROMANS 12:1–8 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 34:1–14

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson we will: **EVALUATE** Paul’s teaching about being a living sacrifice and part of the body of Christ; **RECOGNIZE** that being a living sacrifice is a responsibility as part of the body of Christ; and **IDENTIFY** our gifts that can be used as living sacrifices for God in service to the body of Christ.

In Focus

The Carter family’s finances were a nightmare. Randall had been laid off for six months. Still, he and his wife, Brittany, wondered how they had let it get this bad. “We have to get our finances under control again,” Randall said with a heavy sigh at the emergency family meeting. “Everyone needs to take inventory of their skills and find a job ASAP! From now on, things are going to be a lot different.”

The couple’s children were certainly old enough to contribute to the family budget. One by one, Brittany met with each child to determine the best plan.

The youngest, Jack, started mowing lawns on weekends and delivering papers before school. Jazmine made baked goods to sell in the neighborhood. The twins got jobs washing cars after school and on the weekends. The children reported their income to the family on a dry erase board in the living room. Each Sunday, the family paid their tithes on what was earned, saved another 10%, and managed the rest. Once everyone put their minds toward working, saving money, and managing extra income, the Carters were transformed. They became a little less trendy, more grateful, and a lot more focused on things that really mattered. After a year, two credit cards with the lowest balances were paid off, and they embraced living life on a budget.

God often reminds us that He has a unique role for each of us in His kingdom. How has God called you during different seasons of your life to work together with other believers toward a significant goal?

Keep in Mind

“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him” (Romans 12:1, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Transform metamorphoo (Gk.) — To be continually molded, shaped, changed in a permanent way, metamorphosis.

B. Grace charis (Gk.) — Gift, favor, ability.

Say It Correctly

none

KJV

Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office:

5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith;

7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching;

8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

NIV

Romans 12:1 And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.

2 Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

3 Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.

4 Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function,

5 so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

6 In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you.

7 If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well.

8 If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

The People, Places, and Times

Jews and Christians in Rome. While the Romans' power was making itself felt in the Mediterranean world at the time of the later writings of the Old Testament, it did not dominate the world then as it did during the time the New Testament was written. Because Rome was the principal city of the empire, it was inevitable that both Christians and Jews would eventually be attracted to it. By the time Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans (around the mid-first century AD), it had already become an important church (Romans 1:8). But there are other views regarding the origin of the church in Rome. About the year AD 49, the emperor Claudius issued an edict expelling Jews from Rome. The fact that Christians were expelled as well (see Acts 18:2) indicates that at that time Roman officials did not differentiate between Christians and Jews, perhaps because the Christian community was not large enough to be significant.

Background

Romans 12 is the beginning of Paul's concentrated work of applying the Gospel of grace that he has just articulated. The first eleven chapters have given us the major themes of biblical faith: sin, judgment, faith, works, grace, justification, sanctification, and the list continues. Always in view, however, is the righteousness of God. God's righteousness reveals our sinfulness and our need of a Savior. God's righteousness in Christ is the source of our acceptance, as the Father, by His grace and mercy, unites us to the Son through faith, justifying us. But so far this understanding of salvation is largely external and entirely focused on what God has done for us. The obvious question is: "Since God has done so much for me, what does He want from me in return?" Chapter 12 is a turning point where Paul moves to discuss what the response of the Christian ought to be to such marvelous Good News. We will find that God demands no less than all of us. Each of our gifts were given to us by God not for our own benefit, but for His glory and for the edification of the body of Christ. This is not to repay Him for His grace, as such a repayment is impossible. Instead, the fullness of our joy and the shining of His glory is found in our obedience and use of our gifts.

What is the relationship between faith and practice? What are the dangers of one without the other?

At-A-Glance

1. A Living Sacrifice (Romans 12:1–2)
2. Gifts to the Body (vv. 3–8)

In Depth

1. A Living Sacrifice (Romans 12:1–2)

In chapter 12, Paul switches to a direct address as if to say, "Now that I've explained the Gospel, it's time to explain how you, as a believer, ought to feel and act as a result." Thus, Paul offers his appeal: that believers present their bodies as "living sacrifices." When Paul refers to our bodies, he does not merely refer to only our physical bodies, but rather our entire selves as embodied individuals. In other words, God does not merely want our bodies to be working for His glory, He wants our hearts and souls engaged as well. Such a demand is entirely reasonable from a God who sent His only Son to die for sinners. This was God's command in the covenant He made with Israel (Deuteronomy 6:5).

But it is not an easy one to fulfill, especially when multiple demands come from different areas of human life. So verse 2 gives us the source of motivation and strength for such an endeavor. Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world, meaning the world is not to shape us, nor is it to dictate what we do, how we feel, or what we say. Instead, we are to be transformed by the renewal of our mind, an interesting turn of phrase because it is passive. The one who does the transforming and renewing is the Holy Spirit, as He reveals God's will to us.

How does the Holy Spirit transform our minds? How do we guard against the world's constant attempt to shape us?

2. Gifts to the Body (vv. 3–8)

In the previous chapter, Paul encouraged the Gentile Christians not to boast because they were grafted in "contrary to nature" (Romans 11:24). Here, both Jewish and Gentile Christians are encouraged not to boast in any particular gifts. There are no spiritual gifts that are more inherently "useful" than others. Similar to 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the analogy of the body to describe the church: We are not disjointed people in a gathering, but rather we are, as Paul pointedly puts it, "members one of another" (v. 5). This means that if

someone is united to Christ by faith, he or she is our brother or sister, regardless of background, education, language, or anything else. When a believer suffers, we mourn. When one succeeds, we rejoice.

This also means, however, that our greatest concern is not ourselves. Our gifts were not given to us for the sake of self-importance. Instead they are meant for the edification of the body. The gifts that Paul lists in verses 6-8 are all other-centered: Prophecy, service, teaching, giving, leading, and acts of mercy all seek to enrich the life of the hearer or recipient. Each also has practical significance. Prophecy reveals the Word of God; service, giving, and leading help people in their practical endeavors; acts of mercy help physical, emotional, and spiritual health; teaching shapes the minds of the hearers for God’s glory and for the good of those involved. In each of these endeavors, the apostle encourages us to eagerly use our gifts.

What do you think your gifts are? What do you enjoy doing in the community of faith and in what have you been affirmed?

Search the Scriptures

1. Paul makes this appeal “by the mercies of God” (Romans 12:1). What mercies can you keep in your mind as you continue in the Christian life?
2. Can you think of any events in Scripture when the world had one interpretation but God, through the Scriptures, revealed what was actually going on?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Define the term “spiritual gifts” in your own words. What are yours? In which ways do these gifts equip you to serve God’s kingdom?
2. Transformation is often easier said than done. In a world of ever-changing trends, how can Christians sustain their spiritual transformations over time?

Liberating Lesson

We worship God by offering ourselves as sacrifices. No act of service is too “low” or unimportant for us as Christians and no matter the act of service, we ought to engage in it joyfully. When our minds are shaped by the Holy Spirit, we are reminded of Christ, who, though He was in the form of God, did not consider His Godhood to be a reason not to take on flesh and get into the muck and mire of daily human existence (cf. Philippians 2:6–8). If our Savior undertook such radical condescension, so also we ought to be willing. We must walk with each other through the storms of life, no matter how embarrassing or messy. Is your brother or sister in Christ struggling with something considered “taboo”? The response as a fellow member of the body of Christ is not to shun, but to walk alongside him or her.

Application for Activation

When you build relationships with fellow Christians, do not be afraid to ask hard questions and to be willing to answer hard questions about your own spiritual struggles. God placed the body of Christ around you for you to serve them—and for them to support you. But that requires openness, which involves risk. While opening your lives to the people of God also risks pain, the possible reward outlined in Scripture far outstrips it. We must live as our identities in Christ mandate. We were created for such a life. Make an effort this week to spend time in prayer about how to be more open in sharing and receiving from someone you trust in Christ. The first step is usually the most difficult. Record how you feel after the exchange.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Romans 12:1–8

The Christian life is not only a life of privilege and blessing but also of responsibility and service to God and others. Nothing is more important for Christians than a deepening conviction that the righteousness they have received from Christ through faith is to be demonstrated in daily living. The natural and necessary testimony to the reality of Christian experience is a Christ-like life. With the beginning of Romans 12, Paul moves to the practical implications of the Gospel for character and behavior. He will demonstrate that the proof of faith is a new kind of conduct and the purpose of God in humanity's redemption is that we might be holy and without blemish in the sight of God.

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

The force of Paul's ethical appeal that follows is based on Paul's earlier arguments in the letter. However, "therefore" does not only connect the reader with the preceding eleven chapters but looks forward to affirm that justification should lead to transformation. The Greek word *parakaleo* (pa-ra-ka-LEH-oh), translated here as beseech, means to exhort, appeal, beg, or implore as opposed to giving a legal commandment.

Paul's exhortation is in view of what Christian life is: a right standing with God effected by union with Christ through His death and resurrection. There could be no more compelling motive or incentive for giving ourselves to God other than His mercies. The appeal is made in view of God's mercy. He invites Christians to offer themselves to God as the appropriate response to God's prior demonstration of mercy. Paul's exhortation is twofold. First, although with slight modification in language, in the same manner as in Romans 6:13, Paul commands the believers to "present their bodies a living and holy sacrifice" (12:1). Three qualities distinguish the sacrifice Paul calls for. It is to be living, holy, and pleasing to God. It is to be living in contrast to the Old Testament sacrifices, which were slain animals. We die to sin and self so that we may live wholly to Him who died for us and rose again. To live sacrificially is not heroic. In fact, we will all die sometime, whether or not we give ourselves courageously as weapons of righteousness. Our choice is not between heroism and cowardice, but for what and for whom we will live and die. Paul calls for us to offer ourselves in the service of a cause that is greater than we are. We offer ourselves as a living sacrifice so that even our dying may be living in the deep theological sense—living in the new life of the Spirit. The sacrifice is to be holy and, moreover, pleasing to God. That is, it is the kind of sacrifice God accepts as satisfying His expectations. Paul explains that such a sacrifice is not literal, but metaphorical, or better rational (Gk. *logikos*, low-gee-KOCE). As rational, spiritual worship, God desires to embrace the whole of our daily lives, not just the interruptions in our routine set apart for religious activities at a place of worship.

Second, Paul goes further with a prohibition for the Roman Christians "not to be conformed to this world." Instead, they should be "transformed by the renewing of their mind." Paul here calls upon the Roman Christians to make a decisive act of yielding themselves to God. The word for "be transformed" Paul uses is the source of the English word "metamorphosis." What Paul urges is not merely a change of appearance and behavior, but a

change of essence. He advocates a total, radical change. This is not a matter of acting a part, but being completely different, meaning not the person we used to be. The indwelling Spirit of Christ is God's agent in effecting this inside-out transformation, reproducing Jesus in the lives of committed Christians (see Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:17–18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Christians are not to be crammed or squeezed into the mold of the present world. Rather they are to seek a new model realized by the power of the transforming Spirit. The mind, freed from the power of the flesh (Romans 8:1–4), is refocused on “things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). As followers of Christ we cannot go on complacently, allowing ourselves to be stamped afresh by the whimsical fashions of the dominant culture, wherever we may be. Instead, we yield ourselves to a different pressure, the direction of the Spirit of God. We must not be conformed to the world, but transformed from it. To express this idea Paul uses two difficult-to-translate Greek words that we have taken almost sentences to express. The word he uses “to be conformed to the world” is *suschematizesthai* (soos-khay-ma-TEEDzes-thai); its root is *schema* (SKHAY-mah), which means the outward form that varies from year to year and from day to day. We are to allow ourselves to be transformed—*metamorphoo* (meh-tah-mor-FOH-oh)—continually remolded, remade, progressively sanctified. By this means, our present lives may more and more clearly exhibit signs and tokens of the coming age of God, the new order that has already come in Christ.

It is also significant to note that Paul's exhortation is communal in nature, not simply individual. Paul commands his Christian readers collectively to refuse the negative option and accept the positive. Apparently, communal cooperation is called for. This is not a call for rugged individualism—they all are involved. Christian living, or sanctification, for that matter is not a solo performance; it demands a choir, an orchestra, a community of saints. In urging the community to “present your bodies, (plural) as a living sacrifice (singular), holy and pleasing to God,” the community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God's redemptive purposes in the world.

3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

On the basis of entire dedication and consecration that Paul urged, he now makes further appeal for the translation of the ideals of righteousness to one's relational life. First, the Christian life is to be marked by humility. Humility is the immediate effect of yielding and self-surrender to God. Paul illustrates this by his own position. He speaks through the grace (Gk. *charis*, KHAR-eece) of God given to him as an apostle, and therefore without pride. The word for grace means gift, favor, or charisma (ability), in this case God has gifted and empowered him for the apostolic work he is called to do. Each person must have proper self-evaluation. A Christian needs to have a right attitude toward himself or herself. This means without self-depreciation or mock humility. It also means that we guard against exalting ourselves and magnifying our virtues and abilities. Paul's exhortation is certainly apropos for Christendom where a penchant for titles and religious honorifics are the “in thing.” A bloated ego has no room in the life of a believer. The believer is to be sober-minded, a quality that has God as its frame of reference. Our opinions of ourselves should not be based on our natural talents, capacities, or achievements but on God's gifts. If this is so we will never be boastful for we will remember that we have nothing we have not received (1 Corinthians 4:7). We do not have any reason to exalt ourselves above others, but we have every reason to appreciate what God has done for us.

4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

Christian humility has another basis. To be “in Christ” is to be incorporated into a social whole in which individualism may be overcome as we demonstrate a loving concern to serve other members of the community. As the adage goes, “no person is an island.” That is especially true of the church. The church is the body of Christ, a simple analogy but with profound implications. Like the physical body, which is made up of many

members with different functions, so the church is a body made up of many members, all closely related and constituting a unity in Christ, but each one having unique functions and individual responsibilities.

“In Christ” we are a corporate fellowship. Believers have varied functions, which are essential to the proper working of the body of which they are parts; there is therefore no room for anyone to think highly of themselves. The members of the body do not quarrel and compete or envy each other, nor dispute about the importance of one another. Rather, each part of the body carries out its own function as required, however prominent or humbly unseen that function may be. Whatever gift one has received marks that individual for a particular line of service, to which one must devote oneself. We must realistically assess our assets and deficits, gifts and graces, and privileges and responsibilities within the community of faith. If Jesus’ disciples were repeatedly tempted to argue among themselves concerning who was the greatest, we cannot assume that this pattern of thinking has disappeared within the household of faith. But Paul gives sound advice for avoiding dissension in the ranks: First, don’t waste time making comparisons. Recognize that roles, abilities and gifts come from God; leave the assessing of worth to Him. Second, focus on the abilities you have been given, and enhance each gift with the appropriate spiritual grace. Whatever gift or gifts we have received distinguishes each individual for a specific line of service, to which we must devote ourselves.

6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; 7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; 8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

The apostle proceeds by highlighting the diversity of gifts in the church. Each Christian possesses gifts as dispensed by God’s grace and according to His purpose, and it is the believer’s obligation to use his or her gift faithfully. There is to be no competition. At times, Paul appears to state the obvious in this passage— let prophets prophesy; let teachers teach. But at the close of his list of gifts (vv. 6–8), he suggests that the quality of one’s contribution is more significant than its nature or quantity. Thus, giving should be done generously, leadership performed diligently, and mercy demonstrated cheerfully (v. 8).

In several of his letters, Paul identifies various “gifts of the Spirit” (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). Scholars sometimes discuss the gifts under supernatural or natural categories. To do so misses Paul’s point altogether. For Paul, all the gifts reflect God’s activity. Paul suggests that God is the source of all our endeavors and that even simple tasks can be accomplished according to the grace given us (v. 6). For Paul, the distinctions between human talent and divine gifts are lost in a unified body whose members have become a living sacrifice.

As he does elsewhere, Paul provides an ad hoc list of the gifts in verses 6–8. At the head of the list is prophecy. God enables some within the community to discern and declare with clarity and conviction what God is doing among them (vv. 13–19, 29–33). As a result, others in the church are strengthened, encouraged, comforted, edified, and instructed (vv. 3–4, 31). Simultaneously, unbelievers present are convinced by such prophecy that they are sinners and that God is present in the community (vv. 24–25). Whereas Paul understands “teaching” as a gift in the same way as prophecy, prophecy probably depends directly on divine inspiration for its message. In some traditions, prophecy is treated as synonymous with teaching, thereby robbing it of its forthtelling element. This should not be the case. Although Paul would certainly desire that prophecies be weighed, he is nevertheless open to ecstatic spontaneity (1 Corinthians 14:22–25, 31, Acts 21:9–11).

Paul speaks of “ministry” (v. 7). The Greek word *diakonia* (dee-ah-ko-NEE-ah) is better translated as “service.” It was used generally of all Christian service (11:13; Ephesians 4:12) or specifically of ministering specifically to the temporal and bodily wants (1 Corinthians 16:15). Obviously it includes ministry like Paul’s (Romans 11:13; 15:25). The inclusion of service as a gift shows that every believer can do something for Christ. Perhaps a person may never have the privilege or opportunity of standing in public and proclaiming Christ, but every person can daily show the love of Christ in deeds of service.

Paul moves on to giving: “he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity.” Giving is to be carried out with simple kindness. The word that Paul uses is *haplotēs* (hap-LOW-tace) and it connotes both simplicity and generosity. It is openhanded and openhearted generosity out of compassion and singleness of purpose. There is a giving that pries into the circumstances of another as it gives. It gives a moral lecture along with the gift, which gives not so much to relieve the need of the other as to pander to its own vanity and self-satisfaction. This gives with a grim sense of duty, which is giving always with some ulterior motive and never for the sheer joy of giving. Christian giving is with *haplotēs*, the simple kindness that delights in the sheer pleasure of giving for giving’s sake.

The one that ruleth (Gk. *ho proistamenos*, hoe pro-ees-ta-MEH-noce, “he who presides”) with diligence is probably a reference to someone who leads any area of ministry rather than a distinct office. It may have referred to house church leaders. Paul’s point is clear: A person who has the privilege to lead must do so with diligence or zeal. Paul says if we are so called, we must do it with zeal. We must not carry out our tasks by going through the motions. One of the daunting challenges of the church today is getting leaders in all departments of its work. There are fewer and fewer people with a sense of service and responsibility, willing to give up their comfort and leisure to undertake leadership. In many cases potential leaders plead unfitness and unworthiness when the real reason is disinclination and laziness. If a person takes on such leadership, Paul says that it is to be done with zeal. There are two ways in which a teacher may prepare a lesson—with heart and mind or in the most non-engaged way. A man may dully and drably go through some task in the church, or he may do it with the joy and thrill of zeal. The church needs leaders with zeal in their hearts. The leader not only stands in front of others to offer direction but also provides a model for followers. Paul’s concern is that those who lead exercise zeal for and devotion to their managerial tasks (Romans 12:11; 2 Corinthians 7:11, 12; 8:7, 8, 16).

Lastly, showing mercy would include such helpful activities as feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, and caring for the aging. These are to be done cheerfully. Because we have received mercy, we minister with gladness—not gloom—to the needs of others. To a Christian, kindness must be a delight, not a duty. When we practice charity we must do so with a joyful heart. It has to be shown with gracious kindness, Paul says. Yet we must realize that although compassionate care should not be frivolously given, neither should it be performed with drudgery or a cavalier attitude. Showing mercy can also extend to the issue of forgiveness. It is possible to forgive in such a way that is less than gracious by demonstrating an attitude of criticism and contempt. If we have to forgive someone who sins against us, we must remember that we were once sinners. “There but for the grace of God, go I,” said George Whitefield, an 18th century revivalist, as he saw the criminal walk to the gallows. Real forgiveness is always undergirded by love and never shown with an air of superiority.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Trust and Honor God
(Proverbs 3:1–12)

TUESDAY

The Gift of Love
(1 Corinthians 13)

WEDNESDAY

Lifestyle of Christian Believers
(Luke 6:27–36)

THURSDAY

Seek Peace and Pursue It
(Psalm 34:1–14)

FRIDAY

Genuine Love for Each Other
(Romans 12:9–15)

SATURDAY

Living Together in Harmony
(Romans 12:16–21)

SUNDAY

A Living Sacrifice
(Romans 12:1–8)