

Romans 12:1-2

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. **2** Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

As this passage collides with our lives, it brings to our attention three problems that all of us have in living the Christian life. This morning I plan to unpack these two verses, show you the three problems, and attempt to put before you one life-changing solution to all three problems.

Let's dig in...

Paul begins by making an appeal. He is begging us to give up our lives. He is not asking us all to become martyrs...we know that because asks us to present our bodies as a “living” sacrifice. But he is saying, make your life not your own. Live a life...a daily life making sacrificial decisions. Live in such a way that you are always saying, “Not my will but your will be done.” This may lead to our death or at least to our mistreatment. It is really a crazy request. He is appealing to us to no longer assert our rights, to no longer live as if our money is our own, to no longer live as if our free time is our own, etc...On what basis does Paul make such a claim? What basis does Paul believe is big enough...weighty enough...cause us to give up our lives...our will...our dreams in this life?

The mercies of God...

Paul believes that if we consider the mercy God has given us in Christ by saving us while we were still sinners...by making a way for the guilty to be treated as innocent and those who were criminals and aliens to be treated as sons of God...that we should be willing to live a daily life of absolute surrender and sacrifice. This mercy is not just present mercy but it is future mercy. The thought that we will dwell with God forever and every tear will be wiped away and all things will be made new should cause us to be willing to say, I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me...

Introduction to Problem #1

But there is a problem...actually a big problem...Let me introduce it by telling you a story.

In a subway station in Washington D.C. a man positioned himself against a wall beside a garbage can. By most measures, he was nondescript: a youngish white man in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case, he removed a violin. Placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and began to play.

it was a cold January morning. He played six Bach pieces for about 45 minutes. During that time, since it was rush hour, it was calculated that thousands of people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

Three minutes went by and a middle aged man noticed there was musician playing. He

slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and then hurried up to meet his schedule.

A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip: a woman threw the money in the till and without stopping continued to walk.

A few minutes later, someone leaned against the wall to listen to him, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again. Clearly he was late for work.

The one who paid the most attention was a 3 year old boy. His mother tagged him along, hurried but the kid stopped to look at the violinist.

Finally the mother pushed hard and the child continued to walk turning his head all the time. This action was repeated by several other children. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on.

In the 45 minutes the musician played, only 6 people stopped and stayed for a while. About 20 gave him money but continued to walk their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one noticed it. No one applauded, nor was there any recognition.

No one knew this but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the top musicians in the world. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, with a violin worth 3.5 million dollars.

Two days before his playing in the subway, Joshua Bell sold out at a theater in Boston and the seats average \$100.

This is a real story. Joshua Bell playing incognito in the subway station. One of the most talented musicians in the world playing some of the most awe inspiring music ever written and yet he goes unnoticed. People walk right by him.

Statement of problem #1

This is the problem with our relationship to God's mercy. We live in the presence of the most valuable awe inspiring thing in the world and we often walk right by without being affected by it. It becomes so familiar that we stop thinking about it. We would never say that God's mercy isn't worth our time, just like we would never say that Joshua Bell isn't worth stopping to listen to, but in practice we may throw a glance towards mercy but we live as if there are more important things and we leave God's mercy unrecognized by our hearts as we move on with our lives.

Introduction to Problem #2

But Paul's appeal will begin to look even crazier when we examine how he ends verse 1. As Paul makes this extreme appeal, he says that this should be our "spiritual" worship (ESV). Some translations have something like "reasonable service of worship." They are grappling with this odd coupling of the words *logiken* and *latreian*. *Logiken* has this meaning of appropriate, rational or reasonable while *latreian* means worship or service. Paul's point, it seems, is that based on the amazing value and wonderful generosity of God's mercy, offering

yourself body and will to God on a daily basis regardless of the consequences is simply a reasonable way to serve God. It is simply the only rational response of worship to God.

Statement of Problem #2

This presents us with the second problem. It does not always seem/feel logical or rational to say “your will be done” and to turn from asserting my will. When I am wronged and feeling the sting of being sinned against, it seems really reasonable to return evil for evil. When I am tired, it seems really reasonable to drink too much. When things aren’t going my way it seems really reasonable to be frustrated and impatient. When I am struggling financially and not sure how to pay the bills tomorrow it seems really rational to panic. So, to put the problem as succinctly as possible...in real time in my fallen mind and heart, this service that Paul calls for, does not seem rational.

Explanation of verse 2a,b

In verse 2, Paul exhorts us not to be conformed to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Now as a young Christian I was taught that this meant that I should be reading the Bible and Christian books rather than watching television and reading Tom Clancey. I don’t think this is right. It might be a secondary implication. But that would almost make this verse have no relationship to verse 1. But I think this verse is very closely related to verse 1. I think Paul is expanding on the basis of of his appeal “by the mercies of God.” Paul is saying, don’t be conformed to the thinking of this world...the world does not care about God’s mercy and does not value it. The world walks right by it. But rather be transformed by the renewal of your mind by living in God’s mercy...by loving God’s mercy and valuing above all things.

Explanation of verse 2c

This last clause brings up our third problem. Let’s read it: “that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This is actually an amazing statement if you really get it. Paul is saying, if your mind is being renewed you will be thinking more like God so that you will (1) know more precisely what God wants you to do and (2) you will love going in that direction. You will love the idea of returning good for evil or of stepping outside your comfort zone and sharing the gospel with a friend or even a stranger or you will love the idea of being faithful to Christ at the cost of your job or even your life.

Statement of Problem#3

Here is the problem...when God’s will challenges me, I often don’t love it. I often can’t see it as beautiful when it entails me sacrificing something. How can I change this? How can I grow to love God’s will more than my own?

Summary of the problems

Let me restate the three problems that this passage brings out when it collides with our lives:

1. Paul says that we are to live sacrificial lives based on the mercies of God. Often I forget about or am unaffected by the mercies of God. I walk right by them.
2. Paul says that presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice is a rational response of worship to God. But in real time it often seems/feels quite irrational.
3. Paul says that the result of having a renewed mind will be knowing what God wants me to do and loving it. Often, I am too consumed with me and my needs to think

like God, so I don't know what he wants me to do. In addition, when God's will calls me to sacrifice, I may begrudgingly do it but I rarely love it.

Story

Let me tell you an astounding story of three who loved God's will to the very end. We will then consider how they did it, which will lead us to a solution to all three problems.

The men were Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer. All three men were burned at the stake and all three could have avoided being burned simply by denying that salvation was based on the mercy of God alone.

Hugh Latimer, one of the best minds of the English reformation, in his old age (btwn 70 and 80 yrs old) was put in the tower of London in 1553 by Queen Mary I who desired a Roman Catholic England. He was under the sentence of death for preaching the Gospel.

Nicholas Ridley, a prominent English reformer and preacher was also placed in the tower of London prison in 1553 by Mary I awaiting execution.

On October 16 1555, Ridley and Latimer were lead to two stakes where they would be burned alive. As they were fastened to their stakes, Ridley's brother tied a bag of gunpowder to both of their necks hoping to make their deaths quick and painless. And then a burning piece of wood was laid at the feet of Nicholas Ridley. Latimer then said to Ridley:

"Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace, in England as I trust shall never be put out."

And so the fire being kindled, when Ridley saw the fire flaming up toward him, cried with a loud voice, "Lord into Thy hands I commend my spirit: Lord receive my spirit!" and repeated the latter part often. Latimer, crying as vehemently on the other side of the stake, "Father of heaven, receive my soul!" and received the flame as if embracing it. After he had stroked his face with his hands, as if bathing them a little in the fire, he soon died, as it appeared with very little pain.

Nicholas Ridley's death was different. The wood was piled too high and as John Fox puts it in Fox's Book of Martyrs "The fire burned clean all his nether parts, before it once touched the upper; and that made him often desire them to let the fire come unto him." He often exclaimed, "I cannot burn!" After his legs were completely consumed he was still alive and his upper body untouched by the flame. Finally a bystander pulled some wood from the fire and the flames leapt up to Ridley's face and ignited the gunpowder around his neck and he died.

Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury England was also a great reformer. He was a great friend of Hugh Latimer. He was in with all the royals until Queen Mary I came to power. She ordered him to submit to Roman Catholic doctrines and reject the gospel. Under the pressure Cranmer finally wrote a letter to Queen Mary that he would submit. But shortly afterward he repented and announced, "I have sinned, in that I signed with my right hand what I did not believe in my heart. When the flames are lit, this hand shall be the first

to burn.” On March 21st 1556 he was ordered to be burned at the stake. When the fires were lit around his feet, he leaned forward and held his right hand in the fire until it was a charred stump. Aside from this, he did not speak or move, except that once he raised his left hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

The key That Solves the Problem

All three of these men were burned at the stake because they believed and taught that the we are saved by the mercy of God alone. It is very tempting to end this sermon by saying, “So, consume yourselves and feed your souls on the mercies of God and all three problems will be solved.” Although this is true, I have tried it and it leaves out a critical step. There is something that “activates” mercy, without which mercy is simply an abstract concept that does not transform us. This critical step we learn from the account of Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer loved the free mercy of God in salvation. But when God’s will called for him literally to offer his body as a sacrifice, God’s mercy did not immediately compel him; he did not see it as rational; and he did not love God’s will more than his own. He sinned and signed a letter that denied that salvation was by mercy alone. Cranmer was then crushed by guilt for his sin. Then He repented. Suddenly God’s mercy was “activated” in his life. He felt his need for God’s mercy and he fed on that mercy and he was compelled to offer his body as a sacrifice. It suddenly made all the sense in the world. Although it was unbelievably hard, God’s will was suddenly lovely to him...more lovely than his own hand...his own life.

Using the Key Ourselves

As I draw things to a close, I want to put in your hands repentance, not first and foremost as a concept but as a vital tool for you to activate the mercies of God in your life, be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that will lead to you loving the will of God even when it is hard.

Most Christians that I know only repent when they are caught. I want to encourage you to make repentance a daily (or even hourly) practice. When you sit down to read the Scriptures and pray, which I hope you do very often, begin by asking God to reveal to you any sin. Ask him to search you. Reflect on how you might have sinned. Consider your guilt before God. Remind yourself that you live before the face of a perfectly holy God who is personally offended by your sin. Consider how much you need God’s mercy. Sit with that need for a moment until it becomes a hunger and the cry of your soul.

As we close, let me briefly define Gospel Repentance by contrasting it with Religious Repentance¹

1. **Religious Repentance** is sorrow over consequences of sin. You live trying to God happy in order to be blessed.
Gospel Repentance is sorrow over hurting God. Yet, it always holds tightly the knowledge God is for me even though grieved. He is a father waiting for me and ready to run to me and kiss me when I return.
2. **Religious Repentance** is self-atonement. You think that if you are sorry enough long enough you can convince God and yourself. But it is never enough...

¹ Adapted from an article by Tim Keller, “Repentance is All of Life”
<http://www.greentreewebster.org/Articles/All%20of%20Life%20is%20Repentance.pdf>

Gospel Repentance looks to Jesus' "It is finished" atonement. Not to one's own repentance...

3. **Religious Repentance** is traumatic and bitter. Religion is, I obey to be accepted, and repentance is admitting disobedience. Therefore it is terribly threatening and we will seldom do it. When cornered and repentance comes, it wrecks us.

Gospel Repentance is full of Joy- Only rejoicing in the gospels gives us the sand...the fortitude...the security to admit our wretchedness. On the other hand, only the heart understanding of our wretchedness shows us at a heart level how wonderful and free his mercy is.

"Conviction of sin and mercy are cyclically related--one leads to other to other. The greater our sense of weakness and sin the greater our realization of how extensive God's love and mercy really is. But just as true, that deeper assurance of love/grace makes it possible to finally admit the greater depth of your sin. The more sure you are of not being rejected--the more honest you can afford to be with yourself!"²

So, ask God to search you daily, reflect on your sin daily, repent daily, and then feed deeply and daily on God's mercy and you will be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then, out of this church we will see men and women transforming the world...ready to live and die for our King Jesus Christ.

² Keller, Preaching in a Postmodern World Lectures.