

**How Do Living Sacrifices Live?
(Or: Why Is There Church?)**

Romans 12:1–13

Turn to Romans 12. A man once asked Jesus a question. Jesus knew the answer, but did not entirely like the question. So he changed the question to one he liked, and then he answered his question. Jesus did this often. If you read the Gospels, and you notice that Jesus's answer does not match what they asked him, read his answer again, and see if you can figure out the question he was answering.

In the story I have in mind, the man asked Jesus which was the greatest command. Jesus answered: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." That should have ended the conversation. Clear question, clear answer; it's done. But Jesus was not done. "The second is like it," Jesus went on, "love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands."

Jesus did not end with the greatest command because people who love God take that love in all kinds of directions. It is too open. The second great command tells us the most important way to love God, and that we need to know. "What are the two great commands?" That's the question Jesus wanted to hear, that's the question he answered.

Our Scripture today is similar. Romans 12:1 says, "present your bodies as living sacrifices to God." That line has always made me nervous. "What is God asking for? How will this look? How does a living sacrifice live?"

Romans 12:2 says, "don't be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Okay, but transformed into what? In what ways does God want us to be different from the present world? This Paul answers in the rest of Romans 12.

1 Present Your Bodies as Living Sacrifices – Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

Why is this our true and proper worship? We offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing. Why is this our true and proper worship? The KJV said "this is your reasonable service." Why is this offering our reasonable service to God? Why is this right worship?

Because: Jesus offered his body to save us from the coming wrath, and to bring us to God. Ephesians 5:2: *Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* "In view of God's mercy to us," Romans 12 begins. God's mercy was to present his Son as a sacrifice for us, holy and pleasing.

God assumes that we would like to make a fitting response. We'd like to worship God in a way that fits what God did for us. This is it. Christ offered his body as a holy and pleasing sacrifice, so in response we offer our living bodies as holy and pleasing sacrifices to God. That's why our true and proper worship is to be a living sacrifice.

This is a hard call. Makes us uncomfortable. We want it to be easier. It isn't easier. Jesus was clear to all those following him: If we would not die for him, we were not worthy of him. Matthew 10:38 *Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*

So then, how do living sacrifices live?

2 Don't be Conformed to the World, Be Transformed by the New Mind – Romans 12:2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

There are actually two stages here. The first is to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. Romans 8:6–9 tells us that if we have the Spirit, we have the new mind. Romans 12:2 is NOT telling us to renew our minds. I've heard it preached that way, but that ignores Romans 8. When we came to Christ, the Spirit renewed our minds.

First stage: be transformed by the new mind that the Spirit gave us. We have renewed minds, but the transformation is a process. Our renewed mind, which is the Holy Spirit, wants to change us. Be changed by your new mind and by the Holy Spirit. The world wants to shape us to be more like the world. That never ends. Don't go along with that, God tells us in this Scripture. Be changed by the Spirit and your new mind.

Stage two is being able to discern God's will, what God wants. *Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.* The new mind and the Holy Spirit lead us toward God, but knowing what God's will is, in all the different situations we face: that takes some maturity. There is no quick way to that. Only as we are changed more and more by our new minds do we become more able to discern what God's will is in this or that situation.

Romans 12:1–2 are the foundation of a godly life. Present your bodies as living sacrifices, which is your reasonable worship. Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so you can discern the will of God. But we still don't know how this will look. How do living sacrifices live? How do the transformed believers live?

I've listened to sermons just on Romans 12:1–2. If I just preach, "present your bodies as living sacrifices, and be transformed by your renewed minds," and I *don't* look at what follows in Romans 12, then I can preach whatever I think is urgent. And that is not right, because Romans 12 does not stop after verse 2. So let's find out how living sacrifices live, and how transformed minds think.

3 Each One's Place in the Body of Christ – Romans 8:3–5

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but rather think of yourself with sound thinking, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each one is a member of all the others.

Verse 3 - Every one of us, to ourselves, is the most important person in the world. Paul says, my paraphrase, “when you follow Christ, you have to lose that. You’re not the centre anymore. In Greek the word “think” is used four times. *Do not **think** of yourself more highly than you ought to **think**, but rather **think** of yourself with sound **thinking**.* We are to use sound thinking when we evaluate ourselves. What does that mean?

God has given different grace to each of us, like the grace God gave Paul to be an apostle. God has assigned a measure of faith to each of us. Whatever you and I can do, that is the grace God gave us and the measure of faith that he assigned us. Each believer receives their own. In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul asks, “*What do you have that you did not receive? If you received it, why do you boast as if you did not?*” All our abilities are God’s gift.

In v2, we were to be transformed by the renewing of our *minds*. Now, in v3, we learn how to *think* properly about ourselves. I am not the most important person. Whatever I have that is good, it is a gift from God. Whatever I don’t have that’s good, God did not give me that grace or that measure of faith. That is sound thinking about ourselves. The new mind begins to transform us.

Verses 4–5 *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each one is a member of all the others.*

Paul is still teaching us how to think about ourselves. (i) *Each of us has one body with many members.* Plain enough. Think about all the members of your body that you can see, and all the internal body members and organs that we don’t see.

(ii) *And these members do not all have the same function.* That is an incredible understatement. A foot, an ear, a nose, a fingernail, plus different bones and organs. Each so different from what other members do. Our body members, for each one of us, have a huge variety of functions, all to make one body work.

(iii) *So in Christ we, though many, form one body.* Paul is still telling us how to think about ourselves. Each one of us, though there are many of us, form one body in Christ. Just as our physical body with many members is just one body, so also in Christ, we are all one body.

(iv) *And each one is a member of all the others.* It does not say, each one should be a member of all the others, it says, each one *is* a member of all the others.

This is sound and clear thinking about ourselves. None of us understands who we are until we grasp that we are a member of Christ's body, and that the believers around us are members of the same body as we are. We are bound together in to one body by the Holy Spirit, whether we act like it or not.

What does life look like for those who offer their bodies to God as living sacrifices? What do living sacrifices do? When we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds, how do we actually live that out? These things begin with us taking hold of our place in the body of Christ.

We present our bodies to God as living sacrifices, in response to God who presented his Son as a sacrifice for us. And we are transformed by our renewed minds. Verses 3–5 summarize where that goes. We think properly about ourselves when each one of us recognizes that we are members of Christ's body and members of each other. That's being a living sacrifice, that's being transformed.

4 Gifts for Taking Care of Each Other – Romans 12:6–8

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

I'm not going to go over these gifts individually. There are two other lists like this in the New Testament, and each list varies quite a bit from the others. Many different gifts. As the members of our physical bodies, so also the members of Christ's body have grace and faith from God to do things that build up the body.

Whenever the New Testament talks about gifts, it also talks about love. The question is not: what is my gift? The question is: do I love the church and would I like to help? If you love the church and want to serve, you'll find yourself doing what suits you. You have time and energy and ability to do this or that, so you do it. After you've been doing this for a few years, look back at what you've been doing. That's where your gifts lie.

This list urges us to give ourselves to whatever we do. Put your heart into it. A small church like ours only does well when a lot of people do what they do. All churches need this. There is much of this in our church. People in this church do a lot of different things, and they do them willingly and cheerfully. May that continue.

What I want you to see is that this is still explaining how people live when they've offered their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This describes how people live when they are not being conformed to the world, but rather are being transformed by their new minds.

5 The Way of Love in Christ's Community – Romans 12:9–13

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

I will highlight a few of these: *Love must be sincere ... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves... serving the Lord...Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.* In the New Testament, hospitality meant taking in believers who were travelling or in need. Peter says, "*be hospitable to each other without grumbling.*"

In the last part of Romans 12, Paul talks about believers living in the world, and then Romans 13 teaches believers how to live under pagan government, and then in 13:8 Paul comes back again to loving each other. "Don't owe anyone anything," he says, "except the constant debt to love one another."

Presenting our bodies as living sacrifices is lived out first of all in the community life of the church. Being transformed by our renewed mind leads first to serving and loving in the congregation. This is not where I decided to take it. This is where the Apostle Paul takes it in our Bible. He's filling out the second great command.

Why is there Church?

Let's come at this from the other end: why is there church? Why all this gathering together? Why can each of us not just love God and trust Jesus and live clean lives and treat people well and serve God that way? Why must there be all this congregational stuff?

This is an important question because many around us have decided to follow Christ without church. They listen to online sermons, perhaps, and listen to worship songs on their phones or whatever, and that's sure easier. So why all this congregational stuff? Why all this gathering together? I will offer two reasons why there is church.

(i) The core of what Christ wants from us is lived out with other believers. And the instructions we've read today make it clear that this is not just two or three Christian friends. This is a group that will have at least seven gifts of the Spirit active, and will have a wide variety of people and abilities in the group. Maintaining genuine love will be a challenge.

Following Christ is a group activity. One person can skate around with a stick and a puck, but they're not playing hockey. It's a group activity.

It is a challenge, because we are so different from each other. That's exactly what the Lord wants different people getting along. There is church because what Christ wants from us individually is mostly lived out in a varied group. The local church is the only place we can do what Christ says to do.

(ii) Why is their church? Second answer. Because God is starting a new society, a new nation, a new people. Believers are not here to fix the old society, we're here to begin the new society. We're here to demonstrate how people live can together as God intended. God wants the world how his groups live with each other.

The light of the world is not an exceptional individual, it is the followers of Christ living together as brothers and sisters. That's the city set on a hill, that's the salt of the earth. That's what God wants, and that's why there is church. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, we have read all this, and listened to it, and now we turn it back to you. Help us. Do this in us. Lead us with your Holy Spirit to live this out. Work in us, Father, both to will and to do what pleases you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.