

Thought for the Week 11th October 2020

Romans 12:1-2 & 9-21

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do 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.

⁹Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. ¹¹Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit,^[a] serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Emily Wilson was the housekeeper for Kenneth Galbraith, a leading Economic Adviser to various US Presidents in the 1950s-70s. After a particularly difficult morning, Galbraith asked Emily to hold all telephone calls while he took a nap. A short time later the phone rang. President Lyndon B Johnson was calling from the White House asking to speak to Mr Galbraith. Emily told the president that she could not disturb Mr Galbraith because he was taking a nap and did not want to be disturbed. President Johnson said, "Now look here, I'm the President of the United States. Wake him up. I want to talk to him." Emily answered, "No, Mr President. I work for him, not you." When Galbraith did return the president's call later on, Lyndon Johnson said that he wanted that woman to come and work for him in the White House because it was great to find somebody who knew who she worked for."

Do you know for whom you work? Paul implies in these verses that Christians must regard themselves as servants of the Lord and teaches practical, transformative Christian principles for everyday living. We need to think about this, because it would seem that many people and even churches have become so comfortable with the world that they have lost their true identity as servants of God.

There are three very important words in verse 1 of Romans 12 and we miss them at our peril. They are "**Therefore,**" "**Living**" and "**Sacrifice.**" When I was in High School, I remember a teacher who taught English saying to us: when you see the word therefore you need to ask *What is the therefore, there for?* The word therefore always points back. It is a connecting word.

If we don't understand the significance of this word **therefore** in Romans 12:1 we might think that we are able to earn God's favour by giving him our body; that salvation is gained by keeping our body healthy, not having sex outside of marriage, not taking illicit drugs or eating too many fatty foods. If we think that way, we make a huge mistake. That would be to ignore the first 11 chapters of Romans. And yet millions of people in our world have skipped right over this word 'therefore'. Recently, a researcher surveyed a large sample of young people from many different protestant denominations, asking whether they agreed with the following statements:

- The way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to live a good life. More than 60 percent agreed.
- God is satisfied if a person lives the best life they can. Almost 70 percent agreed.

- The main emphasis of the gospel is on God's rules for right living. More than half agreed!

You would think the Apostle Paul had never written Romans. Just to remind you - the first 11 chapters of Romans are about the mercy of God, about God's grace, about how there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, about how we are not saved by works but by grace. Now in chapter 12 we come to the turning point in the book of Romans. We come to the same place every sermon ought to come to – **So What?** God saves us by grace alone. So What? Bible teaching has really not taken off until it has answered the question 'So What?' And Paul being a good preacher deals with the question: So what? In this text he is basically saying, it is time to take the great doctrines of Romans and apply them to our lives. What does the grace of God, the mercy of God have to do with my marriage, my plans of university, my money, my job, my friends, my retirement. Beginning in chapter 12 the rubber meets the road. From now on Paul answers the question 'So What?' Because of the mercy of God, we are to present two things to God. Two things everybody has. A body and a mind.

So, if the first important word in this text is 'therefore,' then the second important word is '**living**' - a living body given to God. This was a very strange idea when Paul wrote Romans. The peoples of the ancient world were accustomed to dead sacrifices, not living sacrifices. When Paul penned these words the great Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was still functioning with daily sacrifices of animals. Many religions around the Empire knew all about animals being killed to atone for sin and in remote parts of the first century world child sacrifice was still practiced. But the word used here is 'living'. In the rough and tumble of everyday life we are to present our body to God. While we are still living, breathing we are to offer up to God our bodies.

So what does your day look like? You get up. You go to the bathroom. You mumble that you have nothing to wear. You go have your usual breakfast. You rush off to work or if you're retired you might shop or walk, or you look after grandchildren. You might even squeeze a bit of Bible reading in someplace but before you know it, it's time to get dinner and then a bit of TV or a good book and it's time to go to bed. That is living for most of us. And we are to do our living as an act of worship. We present our living body to God.

We might think that at this point Paul might have given us some rules on how to present our bodies to God. And of course, that is the trap every legalistic religion falls into. We are given all these dos and don'ts and if we don't toe the line, then God is going to reject us. That is not New Testament religion. New Testament worship is 'whatever you do' in your everyday living, 'do all to the glory of God.'

But hold on a moment - perhaps at this time we have a unique opportunity to take stock, to reassess what we do. The coronavirus pandemic and lockdown have taken away much of the scaffolding of the routine of daily life. We have a brief window in which our lives could be shaped in new ways by the experience, if we can overcome the pull of just going back to the way things were before. Perhaps God has allowed us to be interrupted so that they can be re-sculpted into what he wants them to be. Paul urges his fellow followers of Jesus to bring their everyday life out into view and place it before God. Instead of just conforming to the pattern set by the culture around us, allowing our lives to be transformed to God's way of living.

And this brings me to the third important word in our text – 'sacrifice'. Presenting our bodies to God is not as easy as getting up in the morning and brushing your teeth. There is sacrifice involved. It does hurt at times to use our body and mind as an act of worship to Almighty God. It is not easy to present our bodies to God. Our bodies are stubborn. I think it was Saint Francis of Assisi who called his body 'Brother Donkey'. Or maybe he used a slightly different word! The final section of this chapter beginning with verse 9 give us the marks of a true Christian. It lists a number of things we ought to do with our bodies and minds as Christians. We don't earn salvation by doing them, of course, but once we have grasped the mercy of God, we will sacrifice everything else to do these things.

Let me briefly highlight five from the list so that we have a practical take away from this sermon. You want to know how to present your body and mind to God as you live out your ordinary days. Here they are:

1. Verse 9: **run for dear life from evil.** That always involves your body and/or your mind. For some of us that may involve switching off the TV or getting a blocker for our internet. That's not easy. It will be a sacrifice.
2. Verse 10: **Be willing to play second fiddle.** Many of the problems in the church and workplace are caused our selfish nature loves to be number 1. We present our body and mind to God when we don't care who gets the credit for our good works. To back off and let someone else get the glory involves sacrifice.
3. Verse 12: **Don't quit in hard times.** Pray all the harder. It is much easier to give up, to blame others, to sleep in when times are tough. Dr J. I. Packer preached a famous sermon entitled '*Keep on Keeping on*'. Keep on living for God in good weather, bad weather, good health, ill health, presenting your body to God when nobody else is. That's sacrifice.
4. Verse 13: **Help the needy, be hospitable.** One of the most important ministries in the Church is hospitality. The willingness to let your car, your house, your body and your mind get messed up a bit to help and encourage other people. That is a wonderful way to present our bodies to God. And finally,
5. Verse 14. **Bless those who have hurt you.** I'm not sure what shape that blessing will take but certainly it will involve your mind. And it may involve your body. And it will involve sacrifice of one sort or another. There may even be the pain of rejection. Paul makes some suggestions. He says, don't damn the one who has hurt you under your breath. Don't think you are better than the person who has hurt you. Don't seek revenge. In fact, if you see your enemy has a need, do your best to meet that need. Your generosity will shock them, the Bible says. I believe God has a word for us all today. **Remember what the therefore is there for.**

Topics for Prayer

Monday 12 October

India: Covid-19 | *PCI has a number of partnerships in India, where there are currently over 6 million cases of Covid-19. Pray for all those affected by the economic circumstances brought by the virus*

India: *A bill to make it illegal to convert to Christianity is being tabled in the Indian parliament. Pray that this would not go through and that PCI's partners would have the freedom to share the gospel throughout India.*

Tuesday 13 October

Church plants in Ireland | *Pray for PCI church plants around Ireland in these uncertain times as they seek to minister to members and reach those who have no current church association.*

Church planting conference | *The Council for Mission in Ireland had planned a Church Planting Conference for May of this year, which had to be postponed. Pray for the Church Planting Panel as they look forward at the best way to run this valuable event.*

Wednesday 14 October

Romania | *Give thanks for the work of Csaba and Ilona Veres in Mera, particularly the literacy work, afterschool programmes and Wednesday Bible Study.*

Romania | *Pray that God would open doors for the gospel to be shared through literacy classes and that God's Word would transform the members of the Wednesday Bible Study.*

Thursday 15 October

Deaconesses in congregations | *Eleanor Drysdale is a deaconess in Wellington Presbyterian, Ballymena. She asks us to give thanks for people who have re-engaged with the church and those who have come to faith over the past few months.*

Deaconesses: pastoral care | *Pastoral care is a difficult area of work at the moment. Pray for Eleanor and others involved in pastoral care, that they would be able to support & encourage people, despite restrictions.*

Friday 16 October

Social Witness | *Give thanks for all Health and Social Care professionals as they continue to work under considerable pressure through the Covid-19 crisis. Give thanks for the individuals and groups who have been so generous in their support, generosity and encouragement to our homes and units.*

Health Service | *Pray for those making key decisions in the health service over the coming weeks, and pray that those who most need access to services will be able to get the help and medical interventions they require.*

Saturday 17 October

Linkage Commission | *Pray for wisdom and guidance from the Holy Spirit for Chairman Michael Barry, Convener James Livingstone and Secretary Ker Graham as the Standing Commission meets next Tuesday.*