

## So What?

*(This message is the last of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")*

### Romans 12:1

As we wrap up our brief journey through Paul's letter to the Romans, it's helpful to be reminded of what he was trying to accomplish by writing to them:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

The substance of Paul's case is that we were made to have a close relationship with God—that we were made for that kind of closeness and intimacy with him. We were meant to live that way, but it all got complicated by our sin. For our purposes today and in this series, sin is anything—anything at all—that gets in the way of the relationship we were meant to have with God.

But God doesn't leave us hanging. If you trace the history of the human relationship to God you see that God has always provided a way—no matter what we do to mess it up—God has always provided a way for us to come back to him—that's the point of the Old Testament Law and the prophets and the promise of a Messiah.

God always provides a way back to him, no matter what we've said or done or even believed before this moment.

Romans 12:1

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your*

*bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*

So what about our passage today?

This is another of Paul's 'greatest hits' collection—a passage that we memorize and recite, sometimes without allowing it to speak to us in context. In preaching classes we use this passage as an example of something that should happen in every sermon—the shift from what our message is to what we should do about it—from the indicative to the imperative (for those of you who are taking notes). This is about the 'So What?' question.

This is a rich sentence—it's a text we could have built a series around all on its own. Let's look at it phrase by phrase.

'Therefore I urge you': Right there we have some actual proof that whatever Paul is about to say, it's connected somehow to what has come before. You can't start a something new with a 'therefore', because there's nothing there to build on.

When Paul starts this new section, he's building on some stories and teachings that he's already shared with his Roman readers.

Creation, a way of forgiveness, keeping of his promises, the sacrifice of his son, and the invitation to life in the Spirit—life the way it was meant to be. It's a good list.

But Paul doesn't stop with just a list of things he's already said. Those events—those acts of God—each one of them is an example of a quality in God's character—they represent something about God that matters—that should matter to us. Listen to the next line:

'In view of God's mercy...' In view of all these things God has done—in view of God's overwhelming love, his mercy toward us.

It's important here for us to explore the word 'mercy' for a moment. What is mercy? Maybe the best way to start to respond to that is to think about the

counterpart to mercy—what’s the other side of the coin?

It would be easy to think that the opposite of mercy is cruelty, and in some ways that would be true. We talk about cruelty as the absence of mercy—of being merciless. I can see how we would think of cruelty as the opposite of mercy.

But that’s not what Paul means in this letter.

Paul has been working from a particular point of view from the very start of his letter to the Romans. God’s relationship to his Jewish covenant people is always a part of the evidence Paul is gathering to make his case—it’s never far from his mind as he tries to convince the Roman Christians that God can be trusted. In Paul’s understanding of who God is, the opposite of mercy isn’t cruelty.

The opposite of mercy is justice. That’s worth a little explaining.

The legal framework that holds biblical Judaism together is fairly simple. It’s about getting what you deserve. When Paul says: ‘In view of God’s mercy...’, what he’s really saying is this:

Since God loved you so much that he didn’t give you what you deserve—that he loved you so much that he gave you far more than you ever dreamed or imagined you could have...

And that’s when he moves to the next part of the text—when he makes the transition from the indicative to the imperative—the ‘So What?’ part of the text.

‘Present your bodies as living sacrifices.’ Well. That doesn’t sound very pleasant at all. Who in their right mind would choose to offer themselves to be a living sacrifice? Think about that for a moment.

Julie and I have been watching an American TV comedy called ‘How I Met Your Mother.’ The other night one of the characters, who’s a bit of a stickler for language, was trying to argue for the difference between the words ‘literally’ and ‘figuratively.’ This seemed perfectly reasonable to me, as a confirmed language geek—things that are literal should actually happen, and things that are figurative

can simply be examples. Another character, who didn't share our hero's grammar values, responded, and I quote, saying: 'I literally want to pull your head off right now.'

Paul isn't literally saying that churches should start offering human sacrifices. Paul would have argued, as the Protestants did 1500 years later, that Christ's sacrifice was a once and for all kind of thing. We don't need to repeat that sacrifice, we just need to remember it and what it means. That's a brief summary of *literally* thousands of pages of Reformation theology right there.

So what does it mean then, this business about presenting your bodies as living sacrifices?

To me this is one of the most important 'So Whats' in the entire New Testament.

This is a call to each of us to make our lives available to God for the purposes of spreading his Kingdom.

This is about taking all that we have and all that we are and bringing it before God to see what he might do with it and through it.

There's no mystery here. It's not a coincidence that we're talking about this passage as we prepare to commit our pledges to God's work. But it's not just about money. This is about how much of our lives we're willing to offer in response to God's mercy toward us.

David Landsborough was a 2nd generation medical missionary in Taiwan. His father had started the first medical school in the region—it's still there—and David went back to serve there when he'd been trained as a doctor. During his service there a young boy came in with an infection on his leg that was resistant to all the medicines they had. A skin graft was the only option, but no one was willing to be the donor. Dr Landsborough's wife Jean, who was also a doctor, volunteered and gave enough of her own skin to provide several grafts for the boy. It was through her that this little boy's life was saved. Incidentally, he grew up to be the minister of one of the largest churches in Taiwan, and served as the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church there.

‘Present your bodies as a living sacrifice...’

Paul ends this verse with an important description of what it means when we give our lives as an offering to God. He says: ‘This is your spiritual act of service/worship’

I love it that these two words can be interchangeable in the Bible—service and worship. One writer simply said that the person ‘who has been reconciled and renewed carries out the worship of God through the Spirit by presenting his or her whole being’ in service to God’s Kingdom...‘it leads to the surrender of the whole life, which is spiritual worship.’

So what are we supposed to do...really?

The point of Paul’s letter is that God can be trusted to keep his promises because he’s kept the promises he’s already made. Let’s be clear about exactly what Paul is saying here.

Because God never gave us what we deserved—because he loved us so much that he gave us far more than we could ever deserve on our own—because Jesus Christ offered himself as a living sacrifice for us...

In view of God’s mercy, the call is on us to commit our lives—everything about our lives—to God, as a thankful response for what he’s already done for us.

This faith of ours—part of it is a collection of beliefs we pass down from generation to generation. It’s a list of creeds that help us understand what it is we believe and who it is we believe in.

But this faith of ours is more than just what we believe—*it’s really about the relationship we have with the one we believe in.*

The point here is that we live in relationship to a God who has already held up his end of things. ‘In view of God’s mercy’ is a reminder to us that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has done something amazing already.

The call on us is to respond. We do that by making our lives available to the work of the Kingdom of God. We do that when we share our time and talent—we do that when we commit to the financial support of a local church.

As we move into a time of prayer and commitment as we receive your pledges, I invite you to reflect on God's mercy in your own life—where God has shown you love in ways you never imagined—think on God's mercy, and how you'll respond to it.

In the very first message of this series on Romans we talked about our lives being based on a promise, and called for a purpose. That title for the series was always pointed at the text we read this morning. Our lives are built on a foundation of the promises of mercy that God has kept—that he's fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The purpose we're called to is to share our lives in Christ's name to glorify God and to share his message with the world. That's our spiritual act of worship and service.

As we move into Thanksgiving this week and the Advent season next Sunday, I invite you to remember that Jesus Christ is the source of our thankfulness and holiday celebration—that he is the fulfillment of every promise, known and unknown—and that his call on our lives is simple: He simply asks for everything.