

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.
Dear friends,

So, have you brought your sacrifice to God's altar yet today? Some of you are thinking, "Pastor, have you been studying your Old Testament too much lately? Sacrifices were brought by the people of Israel. They were commanded by God. But we don't bring sacrifices to God anymore." Well... to that I would say yes... and no. It is true that we no longer bring a lamb to church and have it slaughtered and burned up on an altar. However, do we still bring sacrifices to God? Our text today makes the answer clear: absolutely!

In today's message from God's Word, God says to you and to me: "Sacrifice yourself!" Or if you want to use the exact words of our text: "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God."

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, 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. Do not conform any longer 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. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. 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 who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully." (Romans 12:1-8, NIV)

We hear those words, and perhaps our first reaction is: Do what?! Sacrifice ourselves? Yes, God calls us to offer our very being up as a living sacrifice to him. What does this mean? One of the kinds of sacrifice in the Old Testament was the burnt offering called the *olah*. The animal was brought to the temple, it was slaughtered, and the entire animal was then burnt on the altar. No part was left for the giver. Such an offering symbolized complete dedication to God.

The apostle Paul when he says to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, he has this *olah* in mind... this complete dedication. No part of our being is for us... it's all for God. Offering yourself as a living sacrifice means total dedication to God.

If we are to be totally dedicated to God, that means there must be a change. There must be a separation. We separate from this world. Not that we go and join a monastery or convent, but that we now separate from this world's way of thinking, and this world's way of doing, and this world's way of talking. The world is God's enemy. Battle lines have been drawn up. Offering our bodies as living sacrifices for God means we're not on the world's side and we're not on the border line. We are clearly in God's camp... separated from the world even as we live in the world... completely dedicated to God. Offering yourself as a living sacrifice means radical separation.

Finally, offering ourselves as living sacrifices also means total transformation. Our lives are reformed. Our text said: "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be*

transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Conform and transform contain the word form. Think of a form, or a mold. If you pour jello into a mold, it takes on the shape of that mold. Do not conform to the pattern or mold of the world. How does it happen that a person is formed in the pattern or made in the mold of the world? TV, advertisements, peer pressure, cultural norms... all of these things shape and mold people into a common form... a bad form that doesn't fit God's will and God's ways. Paul says to be *transformed*... that is, formed anew and in a different way. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. The mind of this world is corrupt and decaying and morally off balance, off center and heading in the wrong direction. Our minds need renewing so we once again think like God thinks. When that happens we then do what God would have us do, and say what God would have us say. With minds renewed and transformed, we “*will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*” As our faith grows through God's Word and Sacraments, we find our life coming more and more in balance, on center and pointed due north. And suddenly we find ourselves able to test and approve what God's will is. When our thinking is aligned to his thinking, we know how to please him. We know how to offer ourselves as living sacrifices that are pleasing to him.

Friends, what God describes in these verses is his will that we completely surrender our lives to him. Now why would we want to do that? Why would we want to give up control of our lives to God? Why would we want to live God's way instead of our way? Why do we even feel like pleasing him?

Some people would answer: “Well, it's because we're trying to earn God's favor! We want to please him so he will love us, accept us and maybe someday take us to heaven! We offer ourselves as a sacrifice that hopefully will move him to show us mercy.” Friends, if that kind of thinking crossed through your minds, get it out right now. Our holy living is not and never will be a sufficient offering that would earn God's favor. It's too little, too late. A day late and a dollar short, we sometimes say. Scripture is filled with passages that show us that our work, our efforts, our sacrifices, our performance... fall woefully short of what is needed to impress God.

So why, then, would we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God? The key to answering this question is in the very beginning of the reading: “*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy.*” Did you catch that? “In view of God's mercy.” Before we can even begin to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, we've got to get a clear view of God's mercy. I strongly encourage all of you to get a new view of that mercy by taking time this week to read the first 8 chapters of this letter to the Romans. The whole theme of Paul's letter to the Romans is really summarized well in the first chapter, verses 16-17. “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*” God in his rich love and mercy revealed to us a righteousness which comes from him. A righteousness that he himself provides for us. And he does it by faith. When we trust that Jesus really did live the perfect life for me that I can't live. When we trust that Jesus really did die on the cross for my guilt... and that he rose again proving this all is a reality... then, what God promises to everyone is true *for me*. God in his mercy redeemed me, restored me, made me his child and prepares a place in heaven for me.

It is in view of *this* mercy (more fully explained in the first 8 chapters of Romans) that Paul then tells us to sacrifice ourselves. That is, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. It answers the important question: “Why?” In view of God's mercy.

In the rest of the text before us today, then, Paul continues by explaining how can we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices. In short, we do so when we take the gifts, abilities and resources that God has entrusted to us and wisely employ them to give him honor and glory. That means we must first **do an inventory** of our gifts, abilities and resources. In other words, we have to know exactly what we have to work with if we are going glorify God in the best way possible. Take inventory.

When we do so, the text says, *“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”* Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought. Consider your abilities and gifts with sober judgment and objective consideration. There is no room for sinful pride as we take inventory! Many churches have suffered when one member or another has thought more of himself and his gifts and abilities than he ought to have. God doesn't give equal gifts in equal measure. He gives different gifts, and in different measures. If you happen to have a lot of gifts in one area, don't be proud. All it means is God expects *more* out of you than someone who has fewer gifts.

We use these gifts: *according to the measure of faith given*. Remember who you were without Christ. Remember who you are with Christ. Remember God gave Christ, and God gave you faith in Christ. With this in mind... with God's mercy in mind, we realize the playing field is level. We are all equal in God's eyes. All sinners. All redeemed. All loved. In view of this, how can pride rise up? It can't.

These differing gifts and abilities given in different measures are given for the common good. *“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 who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”* Take an inventory of your gifts and abilities and resources, and consider how they plug in to the bigger picture... the body of Christ.

Then, we have specific examples of gifts. Let's take a quick look. But let's do so in a unique way. Let's say another member of our church invited you to a birthday party. It's a big party, many are present. As the birthday cake is about to be brought out to put on the table, the hostess of the party drops the cake and it splatters all over the floor. How do different spiritual gifts come into play here?

First, Paul says, *if a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith*. Prophecy: To speak God's word. That cake hits the floor and someone with this gift says, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. May the name of the Lord be praised! This cake means nothing to our eternal happiness and doesn't effect our relationship with God in the least.” The gift of prophesying... speaking an appropriate Word of God.

If it is serving, let him serve. The cake drops and someone with this gift says, “You let me clean that up! I'll get the broom and wash cloth!”

“If your gift is teaching, then teach.” The cake falls. If you have this gift, you might see a teachable moment. You bend down and say to your 10 year old: “Isn't life just that fleeting. You never know when catastrophe will come.”

Paul went on to say, *if it is encouraging, let him encourage.* The cake falls and the encourager says, “That’s okay! Not a big deal. We all saw how beautiful that cake was and how nice you made it. We were all about to tear it up anyway. Besides, who of us needs those extra calories. There’s plenty of ice cream for anyone who wants some desert!”

Paul described the next spiritual gift. *If it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously.* That person says, “Everyone keep having fun... I’m going to run out to HyVee and quick buy another cake.”

Next: *“If it is leadership, let him govern diligently.”* That person jumps in and says, “Alright, no big deal. Jill, you grab the broom. Bob, you get the wash cloth. Fred, bring the garbage can over here. Joe, pick up those big pieces. We’ll have this done in a flash.”

“If it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.” This person puts an arm around the hostess and says, “I know how frustrating this must be for you. We’re all here for you. Don’t worry about out.”

Each used their gifts to help in this situation. Each helped in a unique way. The hostess was overwhelmed with what was needed on every front. That’s what happens when every member of body the body of Christ is functioning well. And this is just how some gifts can be employed in one situation. Think about the living organism that is Christ’s church... the body of Christ... and consider what your gifts and abilities are. Think of how blessed we all will be as we each use our unique gifts in the measure given to the glory and honor of our Lord and Savior who first loved us! What a glorious church it would be!

Dear friends, in view of God’s mercy, sacrifice yourselves. Offer you very being, your whole self, as a living sacrifice to God. Take time now, today, this week to inventory the gifts God has given, and consider how you will plug them in to the body of Christ for its health and blessing and God’s honor. To God be the glory... in individual lives... but more importantly as we work together as the body of Christ. Amen.