

Sacrifice

THE LIFE OF A BELIEVER IS ONE OF SACRIFICE AND COMMUNITY.

In the summer of 2022, I retired from Gateway Seminary where I taught New Testament for over thirty years and served as Academic Vice President for fifteen. Since then, I have relocated to Northern California, taught a Bible study class in my home church, served as an interim pastor, filled in for pastors on vacation, and continued writing for Life-way. I continue doing these things because retirement changed my situation but did not change my obligation.

Though engaged in vocational ministry for almost sixty years, I never thought of ministry as a job, but I did understand it as an obligation. I felt this way because I have always thought of myself first as a believer gifted for service in the body of Christ. And the place I lived or the job I held never changed that fact. My location and vocation simply established the setting in which I served God.

Sometimes new believers think that only people engaged in vocational ministry operate under an obligation to service. But anyone who reads Paul's letters with care will quickly discover that this is not the case. Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12; and the passage we will study today all teach us that the church functions as the body of Christ. Paul used body imagery to highlight God's intent to gift and utilize all believers, whatever their vocations, in the work of the church and in service to His kingdom.

The organic nature of the body imagery reminds believers that their church is not just a religious organization. God intends it to function as the hands and feet and voice and heart of Christ in our world today. And no member of the church is just a spectator. God gifts all and intends that all will function as active participants in service to Him, His people, and His world.

As we work through the Scripture passage today, we will find that God transforms individuals and intends that those individuals will work together in harmony. He intends that they will treat one another with respect as each contributes to their common work as God's servants as they are able. This is God's will for His followers, and those who conform to it will find that it is in fact good, pleasing, and perfect.

Romans 12:1-21

Many scholars point out a pattern observable in several of Paul's letters. After a relatively brief introductory section, Paul would address at length the major theological issues important for the church; then he would write about the ethical behavior that should be evident in its fellowship. The letter to the Romans is organized in this way. The theological truths expressed in Romans 1-11 are followed by several chapters focused on the proper behavior of believers (Rom. 12-15).

Distinct theological and ethical sections in Paul's letters do not mean that Paul saw the two as separate matters. For instance, in the theological section of Romans, Paul taught that believers must not let sin have dominion over them (6:12-14). And those who are in Christ must live according to the Spirit, not live according to the flesh (8:3-4). Similarly, the ethical section of Romans is founded on and expresses theological truths. Believers are to work in mutual respect and harmony because they are one body in Christ (12:3-5). And believers' judgment of and treatment of others should be tempered by the certainty that we shall all ultimately give account of ourselves to God (14:10-12).

 ▶ EXPLORE THE TEXT ◀

Living Sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2)

Theological passages in Paul's letters can tell us what we should believe. Ethical passages can tell us how we should behave. But a person can't reason or work his or her way into the kingdom of God. Salvation comes by placing faith in the resurrected Jesus as Savior and Lord (10:9-10). Then the new birth of salvation and the indwelling of the Spirit lead to the transformation of the thinking and the behavior of the believer.

VERSE 1

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship.

Therefore alludes to truths previously taught and, at the same time, points to some implications or applications of those truths. The phrase that follows the *therefore* provides an indication of what Paul had in mind. The exhortation, **I urge you**, was delivered **in view of the mercies of God**. God is not indifferent to the lostness of humanity. The fact that all have sinned (3:23) grieves God. His willingness to forgive and send His Son to die reveals the depth of His concern. The gospel's call to all, Jew and Gentile, expresses the breadth of God's concern.

Paul's statement, *I urge you*, echoes the numerous times in his letters that he called on believers to put off their old way of life and put on the way of Christ (Col. 3:5-17). Believers grow in Christlikeness from spiritual infants to maturity (Eph. 4:14-16) and this takes both commitment and time.

Paul used the image of sacrifice to describe the believers' commitment. He urged his readers to **present your bodies as a living sacrifice**. The word Paul used for *present* was a technical term for the presenting or "offering" of a sacrifice. But Paul also used the term for giving one's self over as a slave to sin or as a servant of God (Rom. 6:13,16,19).

The thing presented in this context is *your bodies*. Giving *your bodies* can be synonymous with giving yourself, and Paul certainly called for believers to give their entire person, the physical and the spiritual, to God. The use of *bodies* rather than "self" stresses the believers' present earthly existence. Conversion should affect not just a believer's future or spiritual commitments, but their present, physical behavior as well.

Paul urged believers to present their bodies to God as a *sacrifice*. The believer's self-sacrifice to God in this passage is an act of service leading to a transformed person (12:2). The *bodies* presented for sacrifice are described as **living, holy, and pleasing to God**. The ones who present themselves as sacrifices continue to live, but now as those completely devoted to God. Believers are also urged to present themselves as *holy*. The verbal form of the word refers to something being sanctified or consecrated to God. An object or person consecrated to God is dedicated to serve God alone and does so in a way consistent with His nature and commands. The believers who give themselves to God, serving and obeying Him fully, will also be *pleasing* to God.

Finally, Paul described such genuine and total service to God as **your true worship**. *Worship* carries the idea of "service" (NASB). *Service* can also refer to performing assigned duties (Heb. 9:6, ESV) or doing something that would please God (John 16:2). The phrase in this context asserts that worshipful service to God consists of the genuine and thoughtful dedication of self to the one true God.

VERSE 2

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

Paul strengthened the positive exhortation with its negative alternative. Believers should dedicate themselves to God, **not be conformed to this age**. *Conformed* implies being shaped by a pattern or mold. The pattern Paul warned believers against following was that represented by *this age*. Elsewhere Paul referred to the same as “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

Rather than live like the examples they see in the present, sinful, fallen world, believers should **be transformed**. Paul also used the Greek word for *transformed* of the gradual, internal transformation accomplished by the Spirit as believers progressively become more Christlike (2 Cor. 3:16-18). The believer’s transformation is an internal change that reveals itself in one’s visible, external behaviors.

Paul added that this transformation is accomplished **by the renewing of your mind**. The term *mind* can refer to a person’s intellect, thoughts, feelings, will, or way of thinking. This does not mean that the Christian’s transformation is purely intellectual. But it does recognize that a person’s convictions and attitudes shape his behavior. Rather than continuing to share the convictions of a fallen world, the believer’s commitments and way of thinking are transformed to accord with God’s way of thinking. And thinking in a new way leads to acting in new ways.

Transformed thinking and acting results in the ability to **discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God**. The term *discern* implies the ability to “test and approve” (NIV) something. It often carries the idea of critically examining or trying out something with the result of proving its value or true character.

By living out the *will of God*, transformed believers prove to themselves that it is *good, pleasing, and perfect*. *Good* may refer to something as being of high quality, profitable, or virtuous. To assert that something is *pleasing* marks it as deeply satisfying. *Perfect* can describe a thing as fully developed or, in this context, identify God’s will as being perfect or flawless.

Believers, in light of all that God had done for them, are to serve Him whole-heartedly. Rather than continue to live in line with the sinful, godless teachings and examples all around them, they should be transformed by the power of God. And as they live according to God’s will, they will discover the goodness of the abundant life that He makes possible for His children.



Explore Further

How are you as a believer who is “transformed by the renewing of your mind” different from the non-Christians around you? How does the world pressure you to conform to its ways and values? Pray that God, through His strength and empowerment, will enable you to live in the world as His witness while at the same time not being of the world.

In the Church (Rom. 12:3-8)

A mind made new by the power of God leads to actions consistent with the will of God. And believers find that living as God wills results in a better life than they experienced when living according to the attitudes and patterns of a godless world. To help the church grow in godly living, Paul provided several exhortations reflecting specific behaviors that should become the norm for believers transformed by God’s power.

VERSE 3

For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one.

By the grace given to me points to God as the origin and authority of the things Paul was about to tell them. The apostle was giving direction to **everyone** in the church. In the following statements (vv. 3-8), Paul described the church as the body of Christ and addressed the various gifts the members of that body exercised. At the outset, he wanted them to understand that they were all part of the body and all given gifts that would allow them to serve God, advance His work, and minister to one another.

Paul warned everyone that none of them should **think of himself more highly than he should think**. He then balanced his warning against arrogance with an encouragement to **think sensibly** about oneself. Paul did not want believers to think themselves better than others. But neither did he want them thinking themselves worthless or useless.

A spiritually sensible perspective should recognize that **God has distributed a measure of faith to each one**. This truth should give

all believers both a sense of worth and a sense of the worth of others. The *measure of faith* in this context refers to the various gifts evident in the body (vv. 4-8). The value God places on all is seen in the way He has *distributed* or “apportioned” faith and gifts to each and every individual believer. Since God so values all believers, then so should those whose minds have been renewed by God (v. 2).

VERSES 4-5

Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.

Paul expanded on his “measure of faith” teaching by using the **body** as an analogy for the church. He began by pointing out the fact that a person consists of **many parts in one body**. And while the body can be thought of as a single entity, it is made up of many parts that **do not have the same function**.

This analogy would have been familiar to his readers. Many ancient writers had used some variation of it to teach the importance of both unity and diversity. **In the same way** as with the body, the church consists of **many** individuals who comprise **one body in Christ**. The many individuals could validly point out, even take pride in, the unique virtues or talents of each. But their uniqueness should not be allowed to overshadow or diminish the importance of their common commitment to Jesus.

Christ binds all believers together so that they are **members of one another**, just like the parts of a physical body. In the body of the church, arrogance is corrosive, and division is destructive. They diminish or even deny the value of others whom God has chosen and gifted. They work against the unity that God intends for His church. And by disparaging and discouraging the contributions of others, they weaken the ministry of the whole.

VERSE 6

According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the proportion of one's faith;

Paul introduced a series of statements regarding how each believer in the church should focus on the gift given to him or her by the grace of God and use it to contribute to the church to the best of his or her ability.

Paul gave specific examples of gifts and the way that they should be used. The list of gifts is illustrative rather than exhaustive, and additional gifts as well as a fuller treatment of gifts can be found in 1 Corinthians 12–14 and Ephesians 4. In the current context, rather than describe in detail the seven gifts mentioned, Paul made a brief statement about each. The cumulative effect of these statements highlights gifts as an expression of one’s *faith* and as acts done in service to God and to others.

Spiritual gifts were not just received by the person but also recognized by the church. A believer with the gift of **prophecy** was recognized as one who spoke the word of the Lord. The gift was highly esteemed as foundational for the church (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20). The person with this gift was to use it **according to the proportion of one’s faith**.

One’s faith may be understood as referring to the individual prophet’s faith or to the apostolic faith commonly held by the church. The term *proportion* refers to a proper relationship between two things. As used here, it exhorts the prophet to speak not for himself, but in a manner consistent with the faith the prophet and/or the church holds.

VERSES 7-8

if service, use it in service; if teaching, in teaching; if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; leading, with diligence; showing mercy, with cheerfulness.

Service is the same word used of the “distribution” to needy widows (Acts 6:1). Another form of the word was used of “deacons” (1 Tim. 3:8). **Teaching** refers to giving instruction in general, but as a spiritual gift it focuses on instruction in the truths and ways of the faith. **Exhorting** most often refers to encouraging or comforting others. While the person exhorting can urge change, the term implies an uplifting more than a corrective exhortation. The noun form of this word was used of the Spirit coming as a “Counselor” or “Helper” (ESV) after Jesus’s ascension (John 14:16).

Giving, leading, and showing mercy are all very general terms. As with the other gifts, Paul did not define these but focused on their use in service to the body. Gifts are given not as a reward or to the praise of the gifted individual but so that the gifted person may benefit others. God gives gifts to individuals, but at the same time, He gives gifted individuals to the church. The gifted person then must not simply revel in his or her gift but actively use it in proportion to one’s faith, or with **generosity, diligence, and/or cheerfulness** as they serve the body.



Explore Further

Read “Spiritual Gifts” on pages 1499–1501 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What do Paul’s instructions regarding the body of Christ and spiritual gifts teach you about the way you should serve God and interact with other believers?

In Relationships (Rom. 12:9-13)

God’s transformation of believers is seen in their service to God (vv. 1-2) and in their humble exercise of gifts in the church (vv. 3-8). It is also seen in their treatment of others. A loving and godly spirit should be evident in the actions of Christians both toward those in the community of faith (vv. 9-13) and toward unbelievers (vv. 14,17-21).

VERSE 9

Let love be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good.

Individual believers have specific gifts that they should exercise (vv. 3-8), but all believers should exhibit the virtues and values that God expects of His followers (vv. 9-21). Paul’s list of brief exhortations begins with the command to love **without hypocrisy**. The statement contains no verb, so most translations supply something like **Let love be** or “Love must be” (NIV) to create an imperative consistent with the commands that follow. Loving *without hypocrisy* requires love that is genuine or sincere. Coming first in the list of commands, the call for genuine *love* can also be understood as the foundation upon which all of the subsequent exhortations are based.

All believers should also **detest evil**. In contrast, they should **cling to what is good**. Both verbs are strong words. *Detest* means to have an abhorrence or hatred for something. *Cling* depicts being glued together, joined or united to something. Both are verb forms that imply an ongoing or continuous activity.

VERSE 10

Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another.

Next Paul urged his readers to be devoted to one another like the members of a loving family. The statement uses two compound words. The first, **as brother and sister**, refers to brotherly love. The second, **love . . . deeply**, points to being devoted to someone. Both compound words incorporate the word for *love* commonly used of close friends or family members. Sincere love, like that found in a devoted family, reveals itself in the ways family members treat one another. **Take the lead** means to lead by example, to go before and lead the way. Paul was encouraging believers to show exemplary expressions of love in honoring one another. The word behind **honoring** means to value or hold in high esteem.

VERSE 11

Do not lack diligence in zeal; be fervent in the Spirit; serve the Lord.

The next three exhortations encourage a zealous service to the Lord. **Diligence** refers to the earnestness in fulfilling an obligation. But sometimes people fulfill obligations grudgingly, so Paul added **in zeal**. Believers are to fulfill their obligations to the Lord without hesitance or sloth. **Be fervent in the Spirit** urges the opposite of a hesitant devotion. *Be fervent* translates a verb meaning to be hot or earnest. The third exhortation **serve the Lord** identifies the object of the believer's diligence and enthusiasm. Paul was not just urging religious fervor and service in general but specifically enthusiastic devotion to the commands of the Lord Jesus.

VERSE 12

Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer.

Diligent and enthusiastic service to the Lord rests on the foundation of confidence in God. Paul's next three exhortations all reflect that firm foundation. **Rejoice** encourages believers to find joy and a sense of well-being in their **hope** in God. And *hope* refers to the confident anticipation of a secure future based on the nature and promises of God.

Paul also urged readers to **be patient in affliction**. For Paul, endurance was not just a matter of personal strength but was based on confidence in God. God's ultimate victory and the believer's ultimate security in Him enables endurance on the part of the faithful.

Paul's focus on confidence in God as the foundation for Christian behavior leads to the third command, **be persistent in prayer**.

Be persistent indicates an activity that a person is regularly engaged in or devoted to. Paul used the same word for *prayer* when urging believers to put on the armor of God and also remain in constant communication with their commander-in-chief (Eph. 6:18).

VERSE 13

Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality.

Persistent and enthusiastic service in the Lord, loving others, valuing others, and doing good (vv. 9-12) sometimes means helping others in their time of need. **Share with** is the verbal form of a word commonly used for “fellowship” or the partnering together with others for some common cause. In this context, the partners are **the saints**, other believers, and the occasion is their experiencing of **needs**. From the beginning, Christians with material resources were praised for helping the needy (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35), and Paul urged those in the Gentile churches to do the same (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 9:1-9).

One kind of important assistance for others came in the form of providing **hospitality**. The word literally means “love for the stranger” and entailed providing for a stranger as if he or she was family. At a time when travel was difficult and safe lodging hard to find, inviting traveling believers, especially traveling ministers, into one’s home was a great service and an expression of Christian love (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:10; Titus 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:9; Heb. 13:2; 3 John 5-10).

While Paul’s exhortations in this section of Romans are brief, their importance for outlining the impact of Christianity in life and in relationships is clear. Genuine love for God and for others will be expressed in practical and concrete ways. And these tangible expressions of love demonstrate the reality and the power of Christianity even to outsiders (Rom. 12:14-21).

Explore Further

Read “Fellowship” on pages 561–562 and “Hospitality” on 771–772 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

What did these actions entail and how did they express Christian love?

In what tangible ways can Christians today express comparable love for other believers?
