

“Be a sacrifice!” Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do 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. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Have you noticed that sometimes people outside of the Church can be very perceptive in their critique of Christians? Have you heard people saying that ‘you Christians only go to church to receive the forgiveness of your sins and then you go and sin again, so what’s the point?’

You would have heard at least some version of it, have you? There is a great deal of truth in this critique. Too many Christians have this kind of understanding about what it means to be a Christian.

You live your life like everyone else in this world, but occasionally you go to the service to hear the forgiveness. And that’s about it. The forgiveness of your sins then is the end of the story.

What can we say? This is a miserable caricature of what it truly means to be a Christian. The Holy Spirit in the Scriptures reveals us much richer, much more wonderful picture of what Christian life is about.

We are not simply redeemed *from* sin and devil and death. We are redeemed *for*. We are redeemed for the new life in Christ and with Christ. We are rescued from our old lives, so that we could live new, restored lives.

The forgiveness is not the end. “I am forgiven, now I will go back to my sinful life.” No! As Paul says: “By no means!” The forgiveness is the beginning. ‘I am forgiven, I am redeemed, and now I belong to my Lord Jesus Christ.

He has rescued and saved me, so that I could live for Him.’ Remember this, you are not simply rescued and redeemed *from*, you are rescued and redeemed *FOR*. For the new life in loving communion with the Triune God.

This is a very different understanding of what it means to be a Christian; rich and joyful, attractive, dynamic and filled with hope. This problem, that too many Christians have wrong ideas about what it means to be Jesus’ disciple, is

nothing new. Paul the apostle was dealing with it all the time. We can see that in almost all his letters, he spends the last part of his letters giving very practical directions how to live this new life.

Today we read from Romans 12. This is where Paul begins to describe what our new life with Christ is supposed to be like. Let's look at what he teaches and how it helps us to gain clarity for our new lives as well.

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

Do these words remind you of something? Maybe... "Gracious Father, we offer with joy and thanks what You first have given us, ourselves, our time and our possessions... as signs of Your goodness, and symbols of our love."

Do you recognize? Our offering prayer. We offer what You have given us... Remember, the Gospel, the Good News is that God has come to find us. He searches for us, when we are lost, He calls us by the Gospel, He makes us alive by His Spirit, when we are dead in our sins, He brings us in His divine family, when we are still His enemies.

And He does all of this not because we deserve it, but because of His grace and mercy. He has created new hearts in us, He has taken out our stone hearts, and given us new hearts of flesh. Warm, compassionate and trusting hearts.

This is, why we can say that we offer to you, what you have first given us. This is very important, – whatever good and right we as Christians do, we do it in response to God's goodness and mercy, not to earn it.

He has given to us the greatest gifts of all, forgiveness and restoration of our relationships with the Triune God, inclusion in His family, and eternal life in His ever-lasting Kingdom of joy and blessedness.

All of this is already yours. All of this is His gift to you. Undeserved and unconditional gift of our good and caring Lord. The question for us is not how to earn His favor, the question is – how to respond to His love and grace.

Paul is very helpful. He answers both 'what to do' and 'how to do' it. First, what to do? "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

This is clear. The Triune God is not looking for one part of your life. He is looking for all of you. For Jesus has redeemed you, fully, to be His own. Now we are to present our bodies, our entire lives as a living sacrifice.

What does this mean? We are not to offer to God just some gifts, we are to offer to Him our very living selves. Do you have a body? Sure! And since we all have bodies, we all can offer them as sacrifices to our Lord.

Are you ever without your body? No, of course, not! And since we are never without bodies, our worship to the Lord is constant. We can say that offering our bodies as living sacrifices we worship our Lord 7/24. Our entire lives become about witnessing and proclaiming the goodness of our God.

Do you see how radical it is? Sometimes even Christians think, that, fine, I'll give to God this one hour on Sunday morning. When I have time. That will be my precious sacrifices. It is so sad when people think this way.

We don't come here to do something for God, we come here to receive God's blessings. But then, when we leave the Divine Service in our bodies, then we begin our worship, offering our entire lives as a living sacrifice to our God.

If it is so, can we do whatever pleases us? No! We are to live to please our Lord and be acceptable in His eyes. Paul calls such life – our spiritual worship. Actually the translation 'spiritual' is not good.

What Paul emphasizes, is that we need to strive to be conscious and deliberate about how we lead our lives as Christians. He explains it more in the next sentence. And this is where he tells 'how to' live these new lives.

“Do 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.”

We live in this world, and it shapes us much more that we realize. TV, newspapers, Internet, movies, society around us. All of this tries to conform us to the world. Sometimes quite forcefully. This is, why too often many Christians are, in fact, no different that the society around us.

As Paul emphasize, we need to be conscious and deliberate about how we lead our new life in Christ. This is what our “Speak Lord” event was about the last weekend. To help us to think through and to learn how to live as Christians.

“Be transformed by the renewal of you mind, testing what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable.” Too often we as Christians embrace this world's understanding about what 'good and acceptable' means.

Just be nice, don't offend anyone, support and encourage people even if they do things that harm them and others. The Bible calls such vague sentiment 'conforming to the world'. Instead, God urges us to renew our minds.

Minds! It is not that hard. It simply means to dwell in the Word of God. Read, study, digest, meditate upon, search for, discuss and learn to discern what the will of God is. The Bible is saturated with God's wisdom.

The Spirit speaks to us so that we could renew our minds. So that we could learn what God's will is. For our relationships. For marriage. For families. For friendships. For our work and business and leisure. For our life as citizens. For our lives in the Church. For challenges and for temptations. For decision

making and for prayers. The Father wants you to have all this wisdom. Don't be lazy Christians that are conformed to the world! Renew your mind! Do it on your own, do it in families and with friends, do it in your congregation. This is, why we have our weekly Bible studies. This is, why we have pastors.

This is a joyful part of our new life, to grow in our understanding what is pleasing to our God. For when you love someone, when you are grateful for what they have done, you want to please them, right?

Then Paul continues explaining how to use your gifts living this new life. There is too much to cover today, so we'll just quickly highlight a few things that Paul mentions.

The world these days emphasizes an individual. It is all about you. Think about yourself. Prioritize yourself. Elevate yourself. Use whatever and whoever is around you to promote yourself, to achieve your own goals.

What Paul writes is in total contrast to that. Be humble. Focus not on yourself, but on others. Think about them as more important than yourselves. Then Paul describes us as the body of Christ. Our unity is not like one of a social club, where people come together for they have common interests.

Our unity is in the Holy Spirit. In communion with God. One Spirit unites us with the Father and the Son, and the same Spirit unites us with one another. This union is much deeper and more intimate than anything else in this world.

We are indeed one in Jesus Christ. But we are also so different. And this is good. This is to be celebrated. We come from different backgrounds. With different experiences. With different gifts. Like different members in body, each of you with its own unique function.

Don't worry that you are not like others. Don't worry that others are not like you. Rejoice in God's creative diversity. For what would happen if we all were alike. What would happen if all members in body were legs, or eyes.

Leg doesn't see where to go. Eye can't move anywhere. So, nothing would happen. There would be no body at all. This is, why Paul lists different gifts and encourages us to appreciate them all.

If you are good at sharing the Gospel, go and tell people about this wonderful God. If you are good at serving, serve with your whole heart. If you are good at teaching, teach as well as you can.

If you are good at visiting and comforting people, do it, bring them peace. If you have been blessed with possessions, be generous, not stingy. If you are good with acts of mercy, do it with cheerfulness.

If you are good in leading or administering, use your God given gifts for the sake of His body. If your active years are already behind, pray for your brothers and sisters, for your congregation. It is so, so important.

We are many members and we have many gifts, but we are one body of Christ. This is how we are to lead our new lives, offering ourselves as living sacrifices to our Lord, who is the head of His body, the Church.

And as we strive to live this way, the Holy Spirit will bless us with His presence, and with His joy, and with His peace, and we will experience the goodness of our Lord in its fullness. And that's only the beginning for our life with Jesus. That's only the beginning. Amen.