

Covenant Life: Ministry in the Spirit Romans 12:1-8

preached @ Hawkwood Baptist Church
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Romans 12:1 Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship. 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.

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. 4 Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, 5 in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ *and individually members of one another*. 6 According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the standard of one's faith; 7 if service, in service; if teaching, in teaching; 8 if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; leading, with diligence; showing mercy, with cheerfulness.

Our text unpacked

v. 1 To properly interpret this passage we must first recognize that we are interpreting chapter 12 of Romans. And why is that important? Paul has spent 11 chapters describing the mercies of God. When you study those chapters you will discover that Paul's one big message is that human beings cannot save themselves, but that God has done *everything* necessary to save His people.

God the Father chose us, God the Son died for us, and rose for us, and has now gone to heaven to prepare a place for us. God the Holy Spirit calls us, renews us and faiths us. All of this as the result of the Covenant of Redemption that was established between the three persons of the One God before the foundation of the world.

When Jesus said to the disciples, "This is my blood that establishes the covenant" (Mat. 26:28), he was of course referring to the New Covenant sealed on the cross of Calvary, but he was also referring to the covenant promise He had made to His own Father before creation. To quote Jesus from John 6, "that I should lose none of those He has given me but should raise them up on the last day" (John 6:39).

Dear friends, we are dealing here with the holiest matters our minds may ever consider. We're being confronted with the fundamental purposes of God when he created the world. That's why, when we develop a secondary covenant like the HBC church covenant, we must not enter into it lightly, but rather with all the serious intent that, by God's grace, we can muster. In other words, we must enter into even so small a thing as a church covenant with fear and trembling because we are dealing with the destiny of our eternal souls.

All this raises a logical question; how should we respond to all God has done?

According to Paul the only rational response is to offer ourselves back to God as living sacrifices. The HCSB misses the point at the end of verse 1, with its reference to "spiritual worship." The Greek word there is *logikos*, in which you can see our word "logic." Other translations have "reasonable service" (KJV), worship you "should offer" (GNB), "appropriate" worship (GW), "sensible way to serve God" (CEV), "true and proper" worship (NIV, 2011).

In other words, as we comprehend all that God has done for us in Christ, the only logical, reasonable, appropriate, sensible, true and proper response to God's saving grace is to offer ourselves back to Him without reserve.

But don't fail to notice that Paul says we're to offer our "bodies" as living sacrifices. This takes our sacrifice out of the realm of the imaginary and places it in the real world. Everybody loves God in his heart. That's the easiest thing in the world. But living sacrifices go further. They love God with head, hands, and feet, and with their time, their appetites, and their service. In other words, they don't just love God in the realm of the imagination. They love God in real time where it really costs them something. They throw their bodies into the fight of faith.

- v.2 Speaking of the fight of faith, living sacrifices learn very quickly that they cannot serve God acceptably without a complete transformation of how they think. Here's the key to what Paul is getting at. There is a perfect correlation between the sinful mind and the worldly mind. It is easy to live like the world because we naturally think like the world. But all you have to do is read the gospels to see that Jesus did not think like the world. And living sacrifices pay the price to learn to think like Jesus. But it's worth it because there is simply no other way to "discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God."

Paul directly attacks worldly thinking

- v.3 Speaking of the will of God, His universal advice is to stop thinking of yourself more highly than you ought. This is the first place where the renewed mind is required to contradict worldly thinking. The world says it's all about self-esteem, learning to think more highly of yourself. And of course the world then tells you that you're super great, whether you are or not. Believe me, telling people they're super great when they're not is not a recipe for raising self-esteem long-term.

Now listen carefully. I'm not denying the importance of self-respect, or an awareness of the need for personal dignity and some measure of confidence in one's self. *But what Scripture argues for is not self-esteem, but rather an understanding of our worth in the sight of God!*

Look at verse 3 again, the second part. "Think sensibly, or soberly (about yourself), as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one." That means every Christian is called upon to examine himself, or herself in the light of who we are in the sight of God. We think soberly and accurately about ourselves when we are able to answer three questions.

What has God done for me?

- He made me in His image!
- He sent His Son to die for me so that His image can be fully recovered in me.
- He has forgiven me of my sin and redeemed me from the power of sin.
- He has adopted me as His own child.
- He has placed a public mark of His ownership upon me through baptism.
- He has made promises that guarantee my eternal salvation, not based upon any works that I have done, but solely upon the work He has done for me in Christ.

What has God given me?

- He has given me the Word of God to instruct me.
- He has given me the Holy Spirit as an inner assurance of His love and as a down payment on His promise of full redemption.
- He has given me the promise that all of life is providentially arranged to constantly work out

- God's best for me.
- He has given me Christ's body, the church, which is filled with spiritually gifted people through whom my Christ life is sustained.
- He has given me a spiritual gift, or gifts, through which I am to be used to sustain the lives of other believers.

What does God expect from me?

- Faith in His Son! (Mark 9:7)
- Open confession of my faith. (Mat. 10:32)
- Obedience to my covenant responsibilities. (John 14:15)
- A hunger to gorge myself on all that God offers me through the Holy Spirit. (Mat. 5:6)
- That I would delight myself in the opportunities He gives me to use my gifts in His service. (Ps. 112:1)

Paul mentions seven gifts in this initial list: prophesying, serving, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, mercy. Other lists with additional spiritual gifts are found in I Cor. 12, Eph. 4, and there are individual gifts mentioned elsewhere in Scripture.

But this is not a sermon about spiritual gifts. If you want to learn more about that fascinating subject, you need to know that we will be offering a six-week course in spiritual gifts, starting on February 19 in the 9:30 hour.

What this sermon is about

It is about the meaning and importance of the Hawkwood Baptist Church Covenant. At the end of the service next Sunday all of us who are church members will stand and renew our commitment to its precepts by reciting it together. And when you get to the third major section, you will find that we are pledging, or swearing if you will, to use our spiritual gifts for the glory of God by serving others. And as we do so, we will remember, I hope, that Paul has specifically said *this* is the way we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices.

Quick review of the HBC Covenant's major points

- I. I will protect the unity of my church
 - A. By acting in love toward other members.
 - B. By refusing to gossip.
 - C. By following the leaders.
- II. I will share the responsibility of my church
 - A. By praying for its growth.
 - B. By intentionally involving myself in Christ's mission to the world.
 - C. By warmly welcoming those who visit.

III. I will serve the ministry of my church

1. **By discovering and using my gifts and talents**—"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10 NIV).
2. **By being equipped to serve**—"[God] gave ... some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:11-12 NIV).
3. **By developing a servant's heart**—"Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, who . . . emptied himself by assuming the form of a slave." (Philippians 2:3-4,7 HCSB)

Observations about the third section of our church covenant

1. Every member of HBC ought to be able to fill the blank in the following sentences:
 - a. “My spiritual gift is, or gifts are _____.
 - b. “I serve the ministry of HBC by _____.
2. Every member of HBC ought to be grateful to God for the many ways they are served, and by the same token, each member should make every effort to discover their spiritual gifts and talents for the purpose of serving the rest of the body.
3. It ought to be a matter of great importance that each of us pursue every opportunity to be better equipped to serve God for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.
4. Every covenanted member of HBC should be able to say something like this: As a born-again, Spirit-filled believing member of HBC, the highest aspiration of my life ought to be to serve in the very lowest capacities of our church life, lining myself up alongside my Lord so that we can be fellow slaves together.

Practical implications of the third section

1. Notice the importance of personal initiative throughout our covenant. It never says, “I will serve, but only reluctantly, and only after leaders have begged and pleaded with me.”
2. Instead, on our own initiative we should be seeking places to serve. We should be seeking training. It is never legitimate to say, “I don’t really know much about the Bible, or how to serve, so I guess I just won’t do anything.” Instead we need to say, “I may not have much now, but I’ll use what I’ve got in whatever way I can, and with God’s help I’ll get serious about training myself and growing myself in Christ so that I can do more tomorrow.”
3. Paul’s exhortation to think soberly about ourselves means people generally break down into those who do best when they work for others, and those who should want to lead. What the Kingdom needs is more spiritual entrepreneurs. I believe God is grateful for every volunteer who comes along and says, “I want to plug into an ongoing ministry.” But it is possible that God is even more grateful for those who say, “I’ve got a burden for a particular kind of ministry and with His help I’ll make a run at it, picking up helpers along the way.”
4. If serving in the church is as important as all that, then all of us need to budget time and energy toward that service. Part of being a living sacrifice is scheduling meaningful amounts of time for Kingdom service.
5. A church can only be a disciple-making church if it is a church of disciples. Isn’t that the real question? Am I a disciple? You do remember, don’t you, that in the matter of being a disciple and making disciples we don’t have a choice. That was our Lord’s final command (Mat. 28:19-20). Do you want to know the one indisputable mark that identifies the true disciples of Jesus Christ? Come back next Sunday and I’ll tell you. :-)
6. No, I’m kidding. Here is the one indisputable identifying mark of the disciple—For such people Romans 12:1-2 is more than a memory verse. It describes the way disciples live, as well as the direction they want their life to take until the day they see Jesus face to face.