



When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

“Altar Bound”

Romans 12:1

God never condoned human sacrifice, but there *are* three examples of “living sacrifices” in the Bible.

1. Isaac willingly put himself on the altar and would have died in obedience to God’s will, but the Lord provided a ram to take his place.
2. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect illustration of a “living sacrifice” because He actually died as a sacrifice in obedience to His Father’s will.

The third example is... You! **You** are called upon to “present your bodies a living sacrifice.”

Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

“Therefore” is an appeal to think back on everything that has preceded in the Book of Romans. It’s a word of application, telling us that what we’ve read should make a difference in how we approach living.

“I beseech you” is **not** an expression of *duty*, but one of *devotion*. Paul, after all, was an apostle with authority from God. He could have commanded or demanded. Instead he appealed to the Roman believers as his “brethren.”

As J. Vernon McGee puts it, beseech is “the language of grace, not the law.” Since we’ve been saved by grace, we are to walk in it.

That includes how we teach others about walking with God, too. It seems our default position is always to tell folks what to do. Sadly, we can do this indirectly by pressuring folks or guiltting them. Let's tell them what God has done and let them respond out of love.

In the first eight chapters of Romans "the mercies of God" were on display for you. Paul explained how a holy God is able to justify believing sinners, impute Christ's righteousness to them, and give them victory over sin.

The "mercies of God" toward you are the foundation upon which to live-out the Christian life. As we get further into chapter twelve we will see God's mercies lived-out in various responses we can now have as believers. We're told to, among other things, "Show mercy with cheerfulness... Let love be genuine... Give to the saints... Bless those who persecute you... Weep with those who weep... Associate with the lowly... Repay no one evil for evil... Never avenge yourselves... If your enemy is hungry feed him."

There is a spiritual gift for showing mercy, but every believer is called upon to be merciful. It's grounded in God's mercies towards you. And not just in the past. We sing from the psalms that His mercies are "new every morning."

Even in our troubles God is merciful. C.S. Lewis called them 'severe mercies,' but to the extent trouble and suffering work for us, they are mercies to embrace.

With God's wonderful, bountiful, mercies in mind, we are told we should "present [our] bodies." "Present" is a technical word that was used for the priest's presenting an offering in the Temple. It is thus full of rich symbolism for a Jew.

For example, it would speak of continual activity, morning to evening, as there was continual activity going on in the Temple by the various priest.

It would emphasize another common teaching of the New Testament - the priesthood of all believers and not just a special few. It would remind that we are all ministers of the Gospel of God's grace, all the time.

By the way, this idea of the priest and his constant duties clears up a huge debate among biblical scholars; at least it does for me. If you get deep into studying verse one you'll discover solid, conservative evangelical scholars who insist that the presenting of your bodies is a one-time dedication to Jesus that puts you on the path to holiness.

Others, just as conservative and evangelical, see this as not so much a crisis experience but as a process. Based on the reference to the constant activity of the priest, I think it best to see this presenting of ourselves as a process.

Those who argue for the one-time crisis say the word is in a verb tense, the aorist tense, that demands we read it this way. But the other scholars say that the aorist doesn't demand it!

Why am I bothering to tell you about an obscure verb tense argument? Because sometimes you'll hear a Bible teacher say, "this is in such-and-such tense, so therefore it can only mean such-and-such." That may or may not be true!!! Scholars disagree. While language is critical, so is context.

By "bodies" it's clear Paul means all of you, every part, body and mind and heart and will. Just insert your name in place of "bodies" and that's the idea.

You are to present your body as a "living sacrifice." We tend to immediately begin thinking of what we must sacrifice from our lives in order to please God. We immediately think we must **do** something to make ourselves "holy and acceptable." Or that we must quit doing certain things. We start talking about the disciplines of the Christian life, about all-night praying and rising so much earlier to have devotions. About all the things we ought not do that smack of worldliness.

Paul wasn't suggesting that "the mercies of God" are only yours if and when you are "holy" enough to be found "acceptable to God." If that were true, *none of us would ever be able to honestly present ourselves.*

Seriously, do you see yourself as the Pharisee in the Gospels who came to the Temple thinking he was holy and acceptable to God because he fasted and prayed and tithed? While the tax collector could only beat upon his breast knowing he was a sinner?

Look at it this way. Nothing has been said yet about making yourself “holy and acceptable to God.” The exhortation here assumes you are *already* “holy and acceptable to God.” It is not something you must work at to become; it is something you already are.

You are already “holy and acceptable to God.” You are also, in another sense, to become “holy and acceptable to God” more-and-more on a daily basis.

It’s not double-talk. It *is* the Doctrine of Sanctification. Sanctification is both an act and a process:

- The moment you believe on Jesus Christ you are sanctified. Want proof? All believers in the New Testament are called “saints” from the moment they are saved. And some of them, like the saints at Corinth, were pretty carnal, deep in sin.
- There is also a daily process of sanctification. We learned earlier in Romans we are predestined to become more and more like Jesus. God, Who has begun this work in us, will continue to complete it day-by-day.

Of course there is also final or ultimate sanctification, what we sometimes call *glorification*, when we are no longer in this body and have gone to be with Jesus.

What we have mostly in verse one is a reminder of the act of sanctification. Because of what God has done, we are already “holy and acceptable” and, therefore, we can “present our bodies” to the Lord. More on that in verse two. Here we are simply told it is our “reasonable service.”

Scholars admit the words, “reasonable service,” are hard to translate. Here are a few different renderings:

- “spiritual service.”
- “spiritual worship.”
- “the sensible way to serve.”
- “the logical Temple worship for you.”
- “your intelligent service.”
- “the reasonable way for you to worship.”

Maybe the best way of understanding what is meant by “reasonable service” would be to see how the Bible’s first two “living sacrifices” - Isaac and Jesus - were “reasonable” in their “service” when they presented themselves fully to the Lord - even to the point of death.

Abraham was told to offer Isaac. Isaac was no young boy. He was a full grown man, probably in his thirties. He didn’t need to be subdued into getting on the altar. He presented himself.

How can we say that his presentation of himself was his reasonable service to God? Well, for one thing, we’re told in the Bible that Abraham “reasoned” (Hebrews 11:19) that since Isaac was the child through which all God’s promises would be fulfilled, then if he was sacrificed God would have to raise him from the dead.

In light of God’s promises, then, it *was* reasonable for Isaac to present himself a living sacrifice in obedience to God. He knew he’d be raised; or at least Abraham did.

What on the surface seems a weird, if not cruel, human sacrifice is really the best illustration the Old Testament peoples had of the future death and resurrection of the promised Savior. The more you study Isaac presenting himself, the more reasonable it seems.

In a sense, Romans 12:1 is telling you to be like Isaac. To trust God with your very life based on what He has promised you.

You and I are going to be raised one day. In the mean time Romans chapters one through eight explain that we can walk in the power of Jesus

Christ's resurrection. The only reasonable reaction is to serve God with all our life - no matter the consequences or cost.

Let's face it. While God may not be asking us to literally offer ourselves as human sacrifices, you only need to read the history of missions and martyrs to know that the consequences and cost of obedience can, in fact, be life itself.

Most Christians know about Jim Elliot and his fellow missionaries being killed by the Auca Indians, a group of Ecuadorian indigenous people considered violent and dangerous to outsiders. We love his famous quote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

It's sort of a martyr's creed. It smacks of presenting yourself a living sacrifice for real, when called upon.

We get inspired by his words, by his life, by his ultimate presentation of himself. Then we get up from reading *Through Gates of Splendor* (the literary account) or from watching *End of the Spear* (the film account), and immediately start being irritated at home, frustrated at work, and start pleading with the Lord to 'better' our awful circumstances, when in reality we haven't gotten anywhere near the altar!

It was infinitely reasonable for Jesus to present Himself a living sacrifice. It was the only way lost men could be saved. In eternity past the Son of God determined He would come as a man to die in our place in service to God. Now He has become the firstfruits of many brethren! Whosoever will believe in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life! He can draw all men to Himself. He is the Savior of all men - especially those who believe.

It may seem a big leap from Isaac and Jesus to you, but the truth is that *anything* and *everything* that God asks you to submit to after you've presented yourself as a living sacrifice is reasonable.

Looking back at Romans, you've been justified. You've been sanctified. Now we are transitioning into you being sanctified day-by-day. God is doing it but requires your cooperation.

In the military (and I want to be careful here since I was never military; only that my dad threatened to send me to military school) there is a command, "Present Arms!" It's a method of salute.

When armed with a rifle... the rifle is brought to the vertical, muzzle up, in front of center of the chest with the trigger away from the body. The hands hold the stock close to the positions they would have if the rifle were being fired, though the trigger is not touched.

While again we need to be reminded that Paul was beseeching, not commanding, it was like him saying to us, "Present arms!" "Present feet!" "Present mouth!" "Present eyes!" "Present mind!"

Present your body - all of it, all of you - to the Lord so He can go on sanctifying you til that day you awake in His likeness.