

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Living Sacrifices

Scott Dudley

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Scripture:

Romans 12:1-3

¹2 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform 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.

³For 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 faith God has distributed to each of you.

Transcript:

... Want to say hello, those of you here in the building, those of you joining us online. Thank you that you are joining us from wherever you are right now. Scripture comes from Romans chapter 12 versus 1 and 2. "Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters in view of God's mercies," the goodness of God that we just sang about. "To offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you'll be able to test and approve what God's will is. His good, pleasing and perfect will." So Holy Spirit, help us to understand these words and apply them to our living. In your name, Lord. Amen.

Well, there's a man in my sermon review team who after I preach a draft of my sermon on Thursday mornings, he'll sometimes say, "Okay, your sermon was fine, but it didn't tell me what's in it for me." Like he says that with his outside voice. "What's in it for me?" And I actually kind of like that he does that because let's be honest. That's what we're all actually thinking anyway. We're always thinking what's in it for me? And he's just honest about it. And we measure our experience of faith by what has God done for me lately? Did he give me the school I want, friends I want, spouse I want, job I want? We often measure our relationships with others, like what am I getting from them? Do they meet my needs? What's in it for me? So the text I just read is radically counterculture because it talks about sacrifice, which is the opposite of what's in it for me. And sacrifice is hard. And we don't always like to sacrifice because sacrifice requires a sacrifice. And we don't like to do that.

But today the sermon is on sacrifice. Yay, sacrifice. Everyone's happy about that sermon. Yay. We don't like to do it, but deep down, if we just pause, we also know that what we get out of something to pay on what we put into it. And so the more I sacrifice to invest time and care into my friendships, or marriage, or church life, the more fulfilling those things are going to be. So another word for sacrifice might be investment. What I invest in, the more I invest in something, the more fulfilling it's going to be. Jesus puts it this way. "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

So we're doing a sermon series about how going to church is a good thing, but Jesus offers more and he calls us to be a disciple and disciples are six things. They are marked by Jesus' love. They live connected to a multi-generational, multicultural community. They are eager and equipped to share the good news of Jesus. They are healers of injustice. They live sacrificially, which is today. And they obey Jesus as Lord through prayer and scripture. And living sacrificially opens the door to a lot of good things. Greater joy in school, or work, better

friendships, deeper relationships, healthy families, transform communities, the electricity of following Jesus are all possible if we are willing to live sacrificially so that those things can happen.

Now, it's not a formula. It's not like I will sacrifice. And then X, Y, and Z will automatically happen. It doesn't work that way. But key to abundant living is always some sort of sacrificial living. And what I have observed in my life and in others is that the more sacrificially we live, the more apt we are to experience Jesus' power. And the less sacrificially we live, the less likely we are to experience Jesus' power. And I don't know about you, but I am really good at making the sacrifices that look like sacrifices to other people, but don't feel like a sacrifice to me. I'm awesome at those sacrifices. It's the sacrifices that feel like a sacrifice that I struggle with.

So let me kind of unpack these two verses just kind of phrase at a time. I'll start with just sort of looking at the verses, phrase at a time to understand what they're getting at. And then I'll give some application points based on this text. So it starts with one word: therefore. And that word always signals that whatever is going to follow is based on what precedes that word. And what precedes these verses is 11 chapters on the goodness of God, the mercy of God, that while we were yet sinners, Jesus died to pay the price for our sins. Therefore, in view of all that, in view of God's mercy, present yourselves as a living sacrifice. That is any sacrifice Jesus calls us to is a response to the greater sacrifice he has already made for us.

When my parents' health began to fail, they needed a lot of extra care from my siblings and me and that was hard. It was a sacrifice, but we also remembered how much my parents had sacrificed for us when we were growing up. And so it made us want to do that. It was a response of love to the sacrifices they had given to us. Because see, the danger of a sermon like this on sacrifice is we all leave here feeling guilty. Oh man, I don't sacrifice enough. I've got to sacrifice more. I've got to do more. I'll pencil in sacrifice for Wednesday afternoon there. But if sacrifice is a response to what Jesus has done for us, it will still be hard, but it will lead to healing and meaning and purpose and joy.

So what are God's mercies to you? What are God's mercies to you? For me, it would be something like after doing a bunch of destructive behavior as a teenager, Jesus found me in college and showed me how much he loved me in spite of my sin. Later, he healed me from a divorce. Later, he brought me to this church which has been a blessing. In view of those mercies, I am more motivated to sacrifice for him. What are God's mercies to you? "In view of those mercies," the text says, and it goes on, "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice." Bodies. That's interesting, not just your thoughts, not just your soul. Bodies. Your hands that help others, your ears that listen to broken hearts, your voice that tells the good news of Jesus. Your bodies, as a living sacrifice, I-N-G, ongoing, continuous, not like a one and done thing. The message version

of these verses says this. Take your everyday ordinary life. You're sleeping, eating, going to work and walking around life and place it before God is an offering.

In other words, sacrifice is not an event where I check the box, boom, one and done. I'm good. It's what I do every day where I live, work, play, or learn. Then the text goes on. This, it says, "Is your true and proper worship." Well, isn't that interesting? Worship isn't just Sunday mornings. That's part of it. But worship is also how I live every day, is also worship. And this is really different than how we in our culture tend to think about worship, where we kind of think of worship is like, what did I get out of it? What's in it for me? Did I like the music? Did I like the sermon? And I think that way too sometimes, but sometimes when someone will say to me, yeah, I didn't like worship today. I kind of think of this verse and think you mean you didn't like the way you presented your body as a living sacrifice to God today? Is that what you mean? No, I meant the sermon. Oh, the sermon. Oh, okay.

See, worship isn't just singing and sermons. It's being willing to sacrifice for God and others. That's partly what we're here to do. And then the text keeps going and it says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And I want you to notice something. What comes first and second. First, we present ourselves as a living sacrifice. And then we are transformed. That is in order to be transformed, sacrificial living is essential. There can be no transformation without sacrificial living. Sacrifice releases spiritual power that transforms us. I'll give some examples later.

And then next the text keeps going. And then it says, "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is." That's cool because we all want to know what God's will is. What job should I take? What person should I marry? What house should I live in? Should I move? Should I not move? We want to know what college should I go to? We want to know God's will, but notice again, the order. First we present ourselves as a living sacrifice. That is say to God, God, here I am living sacrifice. I'm willing to do whatever you tell me to do. No matter the cost, no matter the sacrifice. First we present ourselves that way. Then we know God's will. But we rather sort of like to reverse that order, don't we? God tell me your will and then I'll let you know if I'm willing to sacrifice to do it or not. That's sort of how we like to do it. Let me know what's the cost. And then I'll decide.

And in fact, if God calls us to do something that involves a sacrifice, we kind of tend to think that must not be God's will. If it involves sacrifice, it can't be God's will because God's top job description is to make me happy and that sacrifice wouldn't make me happy. So this thing can't be God's will at all. Really clear. Easy. Years ago, after I'd been offered the job here, I asked for three days to pray about it, which was stupid because God had already made it crystal clear through all kinds of events that God wanted us to come here and take this job. But the night

before I had to call with my final answer, call here with my final answer, I was just in agony. I was saying things like, "I don't want to leave my church in California. I don't want to be a senior pastor. Is this God's will? I don't know what God's will is. I don't think this is God's will." On and on and on. I didn't want to make the sacrifice to come here.

And finally, my wife, who is the sole center of reason in our family said, "You don't have to take this job. I mean, it'll be disobedient. But you disobey God all the time. So what's one more?" But have no illusions. It is disobedient if we don't go. The reason I got confused about God's will was I wasn't presenting myself as a living sacrifice first. Wasn't willing to do the sacrifices. First we say, God, I'm ready to sacrifice. Then his will becomes more clear. That's a quick sketch of these verses. So what does that mean? How do we live this out? What does this look like practically speaking? Well, the rest of the chapter goes on and gives all kinds of examples of how to live sacrificially. I can't cover them all. Let me just point to a few.

First, we sacrifice for each other. The text says, "Present our bodies," plural, "As living sacrifices." We're very individualistic, but this text, like most of the Bible is written to whole communities. And then the next verse says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves." So the model for the church is not every person for themselves. The model for the church is all for one and one for all. As I said a couple weeks ago, sometimes I have to sacrifice a little of me so that we can be we. We sacrifice for each other. This is very contrary to our culture. But unless I sacrifice a little of me, sometimes we will be unable to be we. Not sacrifice everything, all the time, but a little of me so that we can be we. And what plagues our country right now is nobody is willing to sacrifice anything for anybody ever. And everyone just wants their own way all the time.

And so we're having a really hard time in our churches and in our families and in our nation being we. I think of families divided over COVID and masks and all those things. Now there is a legitimate discussion to be had about government mandates. How far should the government be able to go to mandate these things? That is a legit discussion, but what's sad to me is families where maybe you have one or two high risk individuals. But some other people in the family refuse to wear masks around them because they're making their statement. And so now they're fighting and no one's willing to make any kind of sacrifice at all. So now they're just divided and they're not talking to each other.

The book of Philippians says this. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of the other." Is that the kind of person you are? Is that the kind of person I am? Is that the kind of church we are, where everyone's saying like, oh no, no, don't pick the music or the sermons or the programs I like, pick the music or the sermons or the program someone else

likes? Is that the kind of church we are? This is the very convicting difficult part of the sermon, just so you know. It can be. I think we're striving for it. I think we're trying to get there. But here's the thing.

If you are looking out for everyone else's interests and they are all looking out for your interests, are your interest being looked out for? Yes, just without all the fighting. And that's better. Remember the music, the sermon, the program that you hate, the person right behind you loves and vice versa. We sacrifice for each other because Jesus sacrifice for us. The Philippians passage goes on and it says this. "In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset as Christ, Jesus, who being in the very nature, God did not count equality with God, something to be used to his advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, humbled himself, by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. In view of the sacrifice Jesus has made for us, re-sacrifice for each other."

A couple weeks ago, someone in an all in group pointed out to me that the early church really embraced this. The first Christians came from a Jewish background, but then pretty soon non-Jews started becoming Christians and joining the church. And they hadn't lived out all the religious rituals and hadn't obey all the Jewish customs and all that. They apostles even decided that non-Jews didn't even need to be circumcised. That was a 2,000 year old tradition that they changed to include others in the community. It'd be like us giving up communion or something like that. It was a huge sacrifice that they made for each other, but it unleashed explosive growth of Christianity. Because as it turns out, a community where everyone is sacrificing for each other is really attractive. I mean, it's just really attractive, especially in a divided world like ours. What are you willing to sacrifice for the sake of others? And yes, that kind of church is way harder, way harder than churches where everyone thinks the same and looks the same and votes the same and likes all the same things. It's way harder to be that kind of church. Don't tell me how hard it is. You think it's hard to be part of this church. Think how hard it is to lead you all. You all don't agree on anything, and what a great advantage to show the world this is how we do what we do in the name of Jesus. Huge opportunity.

Second way we live sacrificially is we use our gifts to serve. The text goes on. "We have different gifts, according to the grace, given to each of us. If your gift is serving, serve. If it's to encourage, give encouragement. If it's to show mercy, do it cheerfully." Sacrificial living means we use our gifts to help others and point them to Jesus, every age, every stage. We have middle schoolers and high schoolers who help in our Sunday school with preschool and elementary students, folks in their 80s or 90s that are part of this church, living in retirement communities, you're praying for other people, you're listening to people in pain, or you're tutoring kids, all kinds of stuff. Living sacrificially means my gifts, my time, my money, my connections, my job. It is not just for me. It's meant to be used to help others see Jesus.

We sacrifice for each other. Use our gifts in God's mission. Those are two practical applications of living sacrificially. And the rest of the chapter, the rest of Romans 12 gives all kinds of other examples of what living sacrificially looks like. Verse 13, for instance says, "Share with the Lord's people who are in need." That's another way. Verse 17, very challenging verse. "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." So sacrificial living might mean reconciling with that person that you're angry at, or asking forgiveness of that person you hurt, or maybe sacrificial living means practicing the spiritual discipline of not having to have the last word in an argument, which is really a hard for me to do. That is really hard for me to do. The whole chapter gives a list of ways to live sacrificially.

So here's our action step for this week. Read Romans 12, the whole chapter every day and say, pray, Jesus, show me how you want to me to live sacrificially this week. Because so much is at stake. Sacrificial living is one key, one of the keys to experiencing the electricity of following Jesus, being transformed. People, it's key to being part of God's transformation of the world. The more sacrificially we live, the more apt we are to experience Jesus' power. And sometimes God calls us to make big, huge sacrifices. And I'll give an example in a bit. But also this passage speaks to the just kind of ordinary daily sacrifices that year by year or change our hearts. For instance, like a man I know who goes to a different church and there was a lot of tension in his family. He and his wife had two sons. They were busy with work and sports and school, and just a lot of bickering and tension in their family.

Well, they heard their pastors say in a sermon that serving brings joy. So they signed up with some other people to go visit a nursing home in their area one Saturday morning. Well, on the Friday night before the visit was scheduled, this man and his wife were exhausted from a week of work, having second thoughts about having to get up early on their only day that they get to sleep in. And then their 12 year old son said, "Nobody asked me about visiting a bunch of old people. I'm not going, I don't want to do it." And this man said that his response would not have earned him the father of the year award. He said, "Oh yeah, well, you're a spoiled kid from the suburbs. And it's time you experience the joy of serving. You're going." His son did not find that motivating.

Well, the night ended with his son going to bed in tears. Next day, they went to the nursing home and his sons hated it, hated it until they visited a 94 year old woman who talked about her adventures of coming to America from China in the 30s and growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown. And their sons were fascinated by her story because it was full of adventure. And she got all choked up that they'd visited her because nursing homes are lonely places. Well when they got back to their house that around lunchtime, their 12 year old son asked if they could go visit that woman again that afternoon. So they went back that afternoon. All week, they

prayed for the out woman and they went back again and again, and kind of created a relationship with her.

And she kind of turned into a mentor for their sons and showed them what courage and perseverance looks like. Because as an immigrant, she had to live those virtues. They blessed her. She blessed them. They sacrificed a day off. They sacrificed whatever else they might have done on that day. Football game, hike, who knows. But it unleashed spiritual power. Got them out of their own problems, diminished their bickering, changed their hearts a little. They got a lot out of a very small sacrifice, because let's face it. That's a really small sacrifice. So what can God do with the big ones? If that's what he can do with a small one, what can God do with the big sacrifices? Because sometimes God calls us to those too. Like a man I know who's a teacher and he gave his house, gave his house to his church to be used to house refugees. On a teacher salary, he gave his house. And he's so glad that he did because he has relationships with the people that live there, these refugees, and he sees God using him to change people's lives. He's glad he did it.

Or I think of a man, some of us met a few years ago in Cambodia, Cambodian man, I'll call him, Zach. Works to fight injustice, particularly poor people who've had the tiny bit of land that they have stolen from them by the Cambodian government, without any compensation. He fights that and he fights to get them compensation. All of which in that country could end him up in jail or worse. And I remember Zach said, "Do I love Jesus, only up until I go to jail or do I love him all the way? I can't sing how great thou art, when this injustice is all around me." And he said, "I'm afraid. I love my wife. I love my mother. She only has two sons. I'm risking a lot, but I have to do this because Jesus has done everything for me. He saved me. He transformed me. I have to do this." And he said all of this with tears in his eyes. In view of the mercy Zach has received from Jesus, he is a living sacrifice who through Jesus' power is a disciple and is healing injustice all around him.

Well, there was a man on that trip with us who was having a hard time experiencing Jesus is real. He was really focused on his job. He just wanted to have fun. Just kind of wanted to party. He saw Jesus as nothing but a kill joy, no fun at all. Well, after we talked to Zach, I asked this man, what'd you think? And he said, "It was the most inspiring thing I've ever seen. And it makes me want to follow Jesus with everything that I've got." Because there was something so attractive about Zach's freedom and courage and the difference he's making in people's lives. He's healing injustice. And he's one of the reasons Christianity is exploding in Asia. He gets to be part of revival.

Now the problem with a story like that is that the sacrifice is so big, sacrifice is so huge, it can be hard for us to relate to it. So maybe for some of us, we start a little smaller, maybe like that

family that visited the nursing home, but we've got to start because so much is at stake. We can't be transformed. Marriages, families, schools, workplaces won't be revived without sacrificial living. Nothing short of revival is at stake here. And when I think of Zach or the man who gave his house to the refugees, it is inspiring to me. It makes me want to live for Jesus as sacrificially as they do. I see their sacrifices. I see their long, troubled road. I see the world on their shoulders and my easy load. But when those saints go marching in, I want to be one of them because on the other side of sacrifice is life and healing and abundance and joy.

So how can you be a living sacrifice for Jesus this week? Jesus, in view of your goodness, which is all around us, in view of your goodness, in view of everything you've done for us, in view of your sacrifice, in view of your mercy Lord, we give you our lives. We say, I am surrendering all. I surrender everything to you Jesus. Help us to do that through the power of your Holy Spirit. I struggle sacrificing. Many in this room struggle with sacrificing. Lord, help us to know your goodness in a way that makes us respond with sacrificial living, that brings you glory, heals us and heals your word. We pray this in your name Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question:

- What is your favorite thing to do, just for fun?

Opening Question:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g. traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- Romans 12 is a list of ways we can be "living sacrifices". In that list, which sacrifices are easiest for you to do and why? Which are hardest and why? Which is God calling you to this week and why?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.
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