

Romans 12:1-2 - Renewing your mind

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Let's turn to page 1139, Romans 12, verses 1-2.

A living sacrifice.

Great. Thank you, Al. That's such a short reading. You might not even have time to find it, like me. So it's on page 1139, 1139, if you've got a church Bible.

And do keep that open, and we'll be working our way through it together. But let me pray for the Lord's help as we come to his words. Father, we do want to pray and ask for your help this morning. We know that the task that we are involved with now as we open your word is not a merely human task, but is a spiritual one in which you're engaged.

[1 : 20] And so we want to pray not just that we would understand intellectually what we are looking at together this morning, but that we would spiritually take a hold of it in our hearts and live it out for your glory.

And we know that that work is certainly beyond me and beyond any of us in the room. And so we ask, please, that you, by your spirit, might be at work this morning for the sake of your glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, after a brief break for Easter, we are back in the letter of Paul to the church in Rome. And after eight months of study, we have arrived at chapter 12.

Can you believe it? Eight months in the book of Romans. Now, chapter 12 marks the start of a new and final section in Paul's letter. Paul here begins to, if you like, land some of the great doctrines of chapters 1 to 11 into the sort of practice of our lives in chapters 12 to 16.

Now, before you come to me at the end and say, well, Steve, I know that that division doesn't really work perfectly. There are applications before chapter 12. I know that. You're right. There are applications beginning in chapter 6.

[2 : 36] But really now the focus of Paul's attention from chapter 12, more than it has been the focus before, is what difference does this make?

What difference does this make? And chapter 12, verses 1 and 2, operate like a sort of introduction or a heading of that section and everything that follows.

And so we're going to make sure this morning that we have this section right and that we understand it properly. And I want us just to see three things from these two verses. And in the interest of honesty, I'm going to tell you that I borrowed these headings from somebody else.

These are Martin Lloyd-Jones' three headings on these verses. But I want you to know that I only borrowed his headings. He preached 14 sermons on these two verses. And so I haven't borrowed his content.

And so we're only here for one sermon and there are three headings. And the first heading is this, motive. What is the motive of Christian living? What fuels, what drives, what stands behind our desire to live as a Christian?

[3 : 42] And notice first that Paul starts with therefore, which means that the exhortation to Christian living is fueled by or follows on from what has gone before, which he summarizes as God's mercy.

Let me read the verse to you again. Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy. Now, notice what this means.

It means the motive of Christian living. The reason that I live as a Christian is not in order to become a Christian, right? The motive of Christian living is not to become a Christian because you do not become a Christian by living as a Christian.

If that's your plan this morning, if your plan this morning is, listen, if I behave enough as a Christian, then I will end up as a Christian. If that's what you think, let me tell you right from the off, Paul says that's wrong.

It doesn't work like that. You do not become a Christian by behaving as one. You can become a Muslim by behaving as a Muslim, right? You can become a religious Catholic by getting baptized, going to mass and confession and praying the right way.

[4 : 50] That is sufficient to make you Catholic. But that is not the kind of thing that Paul is talking about in the letter to the church in Rome. A Christian, says Paul, is someone who is in Christ, who has been saved from future judgment through the work of Christ on the cross.

A Christian is someone who enjoys a relationship with God by the Spirit and who knows because of Christ's work they have a place in glory. And all of that has happened not because they started behaving as a Christian, rather it happened because of what Christ did.

Paul refers to it as an encounter with the mercy of God. A life transforming, eternity destiny changing encounter with the mercy of God.

And the motive and the fuel and the driving force of Christian living is that mercy and kindness. Not our own efforts. Now we must be really clear on this.

I'm going to labor it a bit. Forgive me if I bore you with it. I think it's almost certainly true to say that the average person thinks that being good is an adequate description of a Christian.

[6 : 05] This is, if you like, the sort of theology of the bus. If you ask someone on the bus what they think a Christian is, they would say that Christians are in some sense earning a place in heaven.

That's what they're doing. You know, they're the people who want at the end of the day God to look at their lives and go, well, their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds. But Paul's message is not that, is it?

The good news of the whole Bible, the focus of Romans 1 to 11, is not that God saves good people, but that God saves bad people.

And that we are all bad people who don't deserve salvation. And he freely forgives us through faith in Jesus Christ. But there's more to this as well, because it's not just outsiders who go wrong here. Christians get muddle-headed about this as well. And not maybe just because they think that the motive somehow is to earn salvation. We can go wrong there, can't we? But it's because sometimes we live as if there's no motive for Christian living at all.

[7 : 06] Notice how Paul starts this verse. His first word is actually urgent. I urge you, he says. In other words, what he's saying is, listen, I've not come to chapter 12 now.

And this is like appendix number one for those of you who are still actually reading my letter by now. Those of you who are kind of keen enough to still be sitting in the church by the time they get to chapter 12. No, Paul thinks, really, God the Spirit who inspired these words thinks that Christians should be motivated to live the Christian life.

And they need encouragement. They need urgent encouragement to live the Christian life. Because although sanctification, Christian living, discipleship, whatever word you want to use for it, is the result of the merciful new birth that we've talked about, living that new life that we've been given, not earning our salvation, still that living requires our effort.

And that effort requires encouragement, even urgent encouragement from God. Maybe you'll forgive me if I put it bluntly.

I have a habit of speaking bluntly, which is sometimes a good thing and sometimes not so good. But please forgive me. We need to see, don't we, that Paul is saying that the reason perhaps that our Christian lives this morning are not what they could be, not what they should be, not what they would be, is not a deficiency in the gospel.

[8 : 35] It's not because the mercy of God is an insufficient motive. Rather, it's because either through laziness or neglect or distraction or suffering, we've lost sight of the motive and have given up.

So we fail to work. We become satisfied with sort of half-heartedness in the Christian life. Oh no, we know we're all out. My salvation doesn't base on my work, so it doesn't really matter that much if I'm half-hearted about the Christian life that I live.

So we think we get away with being tepid and kind of lukewarm about being a Christian. It's not a big deal, is it?

And Paul says, no, no, no, it is a big deal. There is an urgent requirement for you to make every effort to live the Christian life. In fact, the whole point of the gospel is to create a people who are motivated to live the Christian life.

And we can be sure that our laziness, our neglect in this task will rob us of joy and rob us of assurance and rob God of the glory that he deserves. And so the motive to live the Christian life is the mercy of God.

[9 : 46] Secondly, what is the manner of the Christian life? In other words, what does the Christian life live? What does that look like in practice? What does it shape? Look down at verse 1.

This is what Paul is urging upon us, that we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is our true and proper worship.

Now, notice the contradiction here. Sacrifices aren't normally living, right? In fact, the process of being a sacrifice involves dying.

The sacrificial lamb does not walk away. Living sacrifice is an oxymoron. I love that word.

Oxymoron, like dry water or cold fire or hardworking Gen Z, right?

That was a joke. I was just checking that you're all still listening, right? Some of you are. So how does this work? What is a living sacrifice? Well, remember, the mercy of God is seen in a once for all sacrificial death in Jesus Christ.

[10 : 49] He did die in our place so that now we can be living sacrifices, making an ongoing, repeated sacrifice of our living bodies, our physical selves in true and proper worship to God.

Now, there's loads to see here. I'm going to try and unpack some of it. But notice just how rich this is. Just how broad Christian worship is. Proper, true.

Sometimes that word is translated spiritual worship. For the Christian, it is not a description simply of the songs that we sing at church. Worship is not an emotional experience or just a single action that we might perform.

Rather, Christian worship is the repeated giving of all of myself to be holy and pleasing to God. And this broad, it involves all of my life, in every way, in every place, in every aspect.

It also involves costliness. Giving up. Laying down. A sacrifice. Christian worship, by definition, costs me.

[11 : 57] Take up your cross. Deny yourself and follow me, says Jesus. Jesus. So it involves the sacrifice of desires of the flesh. It's the giving up of the things that are dear to us, that we feel the loss of.

It's the crucifying of unholy actions and aspirations. It's considering others better than myself. It's hating what is evil, clinging to what is good. It's being patient in affliction, faithful in prayer, giving ourselves wholeheartedly to God and for his glory, whatever and wherever that might take us.

And we do that, don't we? Not suggesting that there is a part of our lives that we're able to hold back. There are not corners of our aspirations where the worship of God is not required to dominate.

The hymn writer Isaac Watts, who was a pastor in the 16th century or 17th century in London, put it like this. When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and poor contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God, all the vain things that charm me most. I sacrifice them through his blood. Now, let me ask you this morning, if you're a Christian, let me ask you, how are you getting on?

[13 : 17] How's it going? How are we getting on with this giving up of ourselves, this self-denial worship? It's tough, isn't it? If you're anything like me, you will find that the body is not so compliant with the living sacrifice demand.

And it's not just the big things, is it? Paul isn't actually saying that Christian worship involves everyone selling everything and living as itinerant missionaries amongst the most unreached.

Ironically, actually, that's probably easier than what he is saying.

What he is saying is actually that we lay down the self-indulgent sin in every area of our lives. In the petty squabbles, in the inappropriate anger, in the anxiety that God might not love me or be working for my good.

In the wasted time fantasizing about comfort or popularity or an aesthetic that we're aspiring to. So here's the question for us, right? If the manner of Christian living is the offering of my body as a living sacrifice.

If that's what the Christian life looks like for me. And I find resistance in my body to do that and to live like that. What action do I do to get my body onto the altar of true Christian worship?

[14:32] What is it that I actually do to fight that desire for more sleep and actually get up in the morning and read my Bible? What am I going to do? What is it that will help me to deny my body's desire for a lazy Sunday morning and prioritize the attendance of Christian worship?

You all feel kind of smug about that because you're here, right? I said that one for the podcast. They can have it when they listen to it later. But what is it that's going to help us to prioritize the things that God wants us to?

Well, just look at how Paul tells us how this works. He shows us a principle. The principle is this, right? Our bodies do what our minds think. Our bodies do what our minds think.

So look down at verse 2, which carries on describing the manner of Christian worship. Notice it does it with a negative. Living sacrifice worship does not, he says, conform to the pattern of the world.

It's not squeezed into the world's mold. Instead, it is being, what does he say, transformed by the renewing of your mind. This then is how you get your body onto the altar of a living sacrifice to please God and not itself.

[15:45] You do that through a transformed mind that is not being squeezed into the world's mold of thinking, but is instead being transformed by God, renewed by him.

Now, I don't know how long your attention is, but please zone in now. As much as I'm able, I want to communicate this to you because this is so important. In chapter 8, Paul talked about being a Christian as having the mind of the spirit in place of the mind of the flesh.

When we become a Christian, we are given a new mindset, a new way of thinking. God, by his spirit, comes to dwell in our lives and transform us.

It's called new birth, right? And that mind is not just a static deposit of information. It's not as if you've been downloaded with the required information to pass an exam.

That's not it. It's a new mind, a new life force that wants to live out in your life through a process of internal renewal and change and transformation.

[16:50] And it does that as it learns and thinks and ponders on the truth of what God has done and who he is. Maybe you can think about it like this.

The new mind is like a plant that needs watering and growing in order to flourish. It's like a child that needs feeding and nurturing as they learn to run and walk and talk and think and speak.

So think about how that works for you if you're a Christian this morning. If you're a Christian, if you believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have, by the mercy of God, a new mind. A new mind that drives the offering of your body as a living sacrifice of worship.

But it does that, and this is the key. It does that not as a subconscious process whereby the Spirit of God zaps you into shape without you knowing anything about it.

Now, the Spirit of God does not make you a robot who no longer thinks or feels for themselves.

Rather, it does it through you or he does it through you consciously, thoughtfully engaging with your personality, your strengths and your weakness, and reshaping them increasingly as you internalize the truth about who God is and what he's done.

[18:03] Perhaps we could put it this way. Our bodies do what our minds think. And then our body's ability to give itself to please God is directly connected with our willingness to engage with the truth about God with our minds.

Let me say that again. Our body's ability to give itself to please God is directly connected to our willingness to engage with the truth about God with our minds.

Thoughtless Christianity is fake worship. Not because real worship is simply an intellectual pursuit that requires us all to have PhDs.

No, not at all. But rather because the access point to motivate Christian worship, and therefore the manner in which it's done, is through our minds.

Not bypassing our minds, but through our minds. So the church that thinks that it can transform you overnight with an emotional experience, rather than with the steady discipleship of an open Bible engaging with what God has said with your mind, that church is selling a false hope and fake worship.

[19:20] Not because it's some kind of brain-only, emotionless Christianity where we're all just kind of great intellects who are just thinking about it all the time. There are churches like that. I really hope we don't become one.

We all need to be emotionally engaged with the truth here. I wish I myself were more emotionally affected by the truth of God's word. I wish we all were. But let me tell you, you access your emotions and your will and your body through the mind, not bypassing the mind.

So what we need is not soft music and emotional altar calls, but conscious, spirit-filled engagement with what God has said about Jesus Christ.

That will move us. That will change us. That will give us the right emotions as we pray and trust him. Now, before we go on, just think about the contrast that's here.

This is how you know that your mind is growing and thriving and transforming you. How do you know? Verse 2. Because you're not conforming to the pattern of this world. Increasingly, how you think makes no sense to the world around you.

[20 : 29] Your thoughts, your understandings, your doctrines, your belief about God, the purpose of your life, the definitions of a life well lived, those are different to the rest of the world around you. People don't understand what you're doing anymore.

Why would you do that? Why would you live like that? Why would you make such a sacrifice? So, Christian, this morning, how are you doing with that? You find yourself being squeezed into the world's mould, resisting climbing onto the altar of living sacrifice worship.

Well, if that's you and that's all of us, isn't it? We need to come back to the gospel that saved us, to this message about Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, and we need to think about that with our minds. We need to wake up in the morning and read about it.

We need to make the most of listening to it taught and explained. We need to come on a Sunday. We need to join a community group. We need to find people at church who will pray with us and talk to us about it. If we're just starting out, coming to Christianity Explored would be a great place to start, to give the best of our efforts and the greatest of our thoughts to understanding better and more deeply and more richly who Christ is and what he has done.

The wonders of his love. The richness of his mercy. We need to read more, don't we, about the depth of our lostness without him. And then the greatness of his compassion for the lost and the broken.

[21 : 48] And then we will find that our bodies, driven by our minds, climb onto the altar and perform this true, proper spiritual worship.

Giving ourselves to please God. So that's the motive and the manner. Finally, let's see the objective. The objective. Where is all this going? What's the point of it all?

Well, you pick it up at the end of verse 2. Notice where this section ends. Then, he says, then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is. His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Now, just notice with me what this is not saying. There's a common misunderstanding, I think, when we read about the will of God. Paul is not saying here that God has a secret plan for your life that you need to discover.

And you will only discover if you give yourself to mind-driven, body-giving, spiritual worship. He is not saying that. How do you know he's not saying that? Well, because he doesn't say about finding God's will.

[22 : 51] The Bible doesn't really talk like that as if the will is a mystery. Rather, the point is this is about testing and approving the will of God as if that has already been revealed to us.

And the point is here that God does not have a mystery will about who you should marry, where you should live, or whether you should become a missionary or not that you have to find out and discover. Rather, the point is that God has a moral will.

A good, pleasing and perfect moral will that he has revealed to us. And the process of Christian growth is that we will increasingly and more wholeheartedly approve of, test, or even if you like, in a sense, kind of fall into giving ourselves to that with a mind-driven, body-given, spiritual worship.

In other words, it's as we live more and more like this, we begin to read what God has said about himself and what he demands of us. And we go, that's brilliant.

I want to live like that. I love to live like that. That's the best way to live my life. So I live for his glory, not reluctantly, but joyfully. I find my purpose in enjoying God and glorifying him.

[24 : 01] The irony, if I can put it that way, is that I find losing myself in a living sacrifice, I find more joy in that than I ever did in keeping myself to live for myself.

I find greater joy in pleasing God than I ever did in pleasing myself. And this is always the end, right? This is what eternal glory is like.

If you're a Christian this morning, this is going to be eternity for us. God hasn't so much just saved us and forgiven our sins so that we could carry on as we were. He's not given us new birth by the Spirit for us just to carry on in this world as this world does.

Rather, the very purpose of the gospel is that he might recapture what was lost in the fall of Adam and even more besides. That God might have through Christ a rescued and created humanity who live for his praise and his glory for all eternity, who find their great joy in doing that.

Heaven will not be miserable. Eternal recreation will not be miserable. Because we'll be living and finding our joy in praising and glorifying God.

[25 : 10] Think about how that works in practice. Where do you find the moral will of God revealed? I'll give you a clue. It's on tablets of stone.

The Ten Commandments are the summary of God's moral will, his good, pleasing and perfect will. That's how Jesus expounds them in the Sermon on the Mount. And so for the Christian who is offering their body as a living sacrifice, who's been transformed by the renewal of their mind, they don't read those commands or those instructions and go, right, okay, that's what I need to do in order to be saved.

They don't read it like that because they know that they are unable to keep it like that in order to be saved. That's Jesus' point, isn't it? As he expounds the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount.

You cannot keep these, he says. But instead we read them and see that this is what we want to do. This is what we would love to be like. This is where we want our lives to go.

And so we read, you shall have no other gods before me. And you don't think, oh goodness me, what a chore. I quite wanted to go to the temple, to the mosque and worship another god.

[26 : 16] We don't think, what a chore. I quite like bowing down to the idol of pleasure and affluence and success. No, we don't think that. We hint, you shall have no other gods before me.

And we go, I don't want to have any other gods before you. You are my God. I love you. I want to live for your praise and your glory and your worth. How great thou art, we say. It's a joy.

It's a delight. You know, we read, you shall not make an image of God. In the Second Commandment, don't worry, I'm not going to go through all of them. I'm not going to make an image of God. God. And you don't think, oh, well, I quite like inventing.

I've got some quite good ideas, God, about what I would like you to be like. We don't say that, do we? We go, no, I want to dive into your word. I want to learn about who you are.

I want to see you for what you really are like. I don't want any kind of images that I might make or that others might make. I don't want to say, oh, you know, this is what I think of when I think of God. I want to think of what does God think of when God thinks of God.

[27 : 15] That's what I want. When I read about how God's moral law tells me of my obligations to those around me, when it says that I am not to commit adultery, and I listen to Jesus' explanation and realize that doesn't just include actions, it's thoughts and desires as well.

I don't moan. I don't complain that his standard is too high to attain. I see my sin and my weakness and my failings, and I turn to Jesus in repentance and know that he has grace sufficient to forgive and show me mercy.

And I say to Jesus, make me like this. This is who I want to be. I want to love others truly and properly.

I seek with all my heart to cut out lust and unholy sexual desire. I don't feed it with what I watch or with what I read or what I wear.

I approve of God's moral law. I find my joy in following it. And when I fail, and I will, and I do, I don't seek to hide it. I repent of it, knowing that God is sufficient for me.

[28 : 26] So here's the motive and the manner and the objective of the Christian life. And the objective is that you might love and enjoy living for God and his glory.

As we finish this morning, I just want to leave you with some questions to ask. How do you finish a sermon on Romans 12, 1 and 2? There's so many sort of things to kind of ponder in our lives.

I just want to finish with four questions. Maybe you want to write them down. You don't have to if you don't want to. They will come up on the screen behind me. Just for you to go away and think about. Think of them as like a kind of diagnostic questionnaire, really.

Really just kind of holding up ourselves, saying, this is what Paul is describing in the Christian life. And how am I getting on? So let me ask you this. This is the first question. How urgent is holiness

