June 26, 2022

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SPILLING THE ORANGE JUICE

Romans 12:1

I recently undertook to gain some new technical skills. I wanted to learn how to do some things on the computer that I’ve not done before. I confess that I have a little secret pride. When I was in college I learned how to program computers in three different programming languages. These are now ancient languages, but my point is I was adept at using computers. I was very good at it. I was one of the first pastors to use a personal computer. You can know that’s true because my first computer was a Kaypro. Yeah, that was a long time ago, so long ago some of you have never heard of Kaypro. So I have this image of myself that I should be nimble with computers, even though I’m not a millennial or younger.

It frustrated me that as I tried to figure out how to do these new things, I hit a wall. I asked a friend for instructions on how to do these things, but I discovered I needed instructions for the instructions. For some of the steps in the instructions I found myself saying, “Yes, but how do I do that?” I needed someone to show me the practical steps I needed to take.

In the book of Romans there is a lot of profound theology. But there comes a point where one might ask, “What are the practical steps I need to take to make this life in Christ work?” What are we supposed to do? Paul begins to address that question in Romans 12. But I warn you, it will jerk us awake in a big way. One of the interesting traits Laurie has had all of her life is she likes to provoke reactions. When Laurie and I were first married she had a few tricks she delighted in playing. One of them was sneaking into the bathroom when I was taking a nice, hot shower, then dumping a glass of cold water on me. I guarantee you, it was always a shock that provoked a reaction. What Paul says in Romans 12:1 in a way is as shocking as unexpected cold water when you are taking a nice warm shower. Maybe Paul was like Laurie, because he certainly provokes a reaction. Let’s look at that verse.

To practically live out our faith in Jesus:

WE START WITH THE MERCIES OF GOD

The church in Rome at the time Paul wrote this letter was made up of human beings. Because there were human beings in it, there were some conflicts. If you have more than one human being in a place, there will be some conflict. Just ask any married couple. The conflicts in the church in Rome were likely at the level of minor friction, but there were some issues that Paul wanted to help resolve so that there could be unity.

Paul will get to those issues. But he launched into his instructions about how to practically live as a follower of Jesus by reminding them of the mercies of God, which was the subject of the first 11 chapters. Why do you think Paul spent so much time explaining a gospel they already believed in, then when he finally gets down to practical matters, the first thing he mentions is the gospel, the mercies of God? It is because if they didn’t get the Gospel right, if they didn’t have it as the solid foundation, the guiding and ruling principle in everything they thought and did, it would all be off, including the way they related to each other. This is true of us as well. If the Gospel is not crystal clear in our minds, and if it is not at the core of everything we think and do, it will all be off in some way. And in the end, it will inevitably fail.

Notice in verse 2 Paul says he wants believers to “be transformed.” The Greek word used there is *metamorphoo*, from which we get the word metamorphosis. When something undergoes a metamorphosis, it completely changes its form. That tells us what the Gospel should do in believers. The goal is to transform them, to make them into something completely different. This is not just about improving people a little bit. It is about a thoroughgoing transformation.

The Gospel of grace in Christ is revolutionary. It is not a self improvement project, but is about a true transformation. The Gospel itself is different and unique. It is so different that it is hard for human beings to truly grasp it and have it as their mindset. But if we do not have our hearts and minds transformed and reshaped by the Gospel we will turn the instructions Paul is about to give us into another self-improvement project. The result will be that the best we can hope for is some cosmetic changes that might look good but are quite hollow.

How is the Gospel of grace different and revolutionary? We saw in chapter 3 that at issue is the fundamental question of righteousness. In 3:20 Paul had said no one would be declared righteous by works of the law. In verse 21 he said that apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known. So the issue in this letter is being declared righteous.

Here is an assertion that many people would not accept as true. It is that the desire for righteousness is a huge concern for every human being. It is behind much of what we think and do. Righteousness is the state of being right, or of being approved, acceptable. It is important because it has huge implications for human beings regarding some things crucial to us.

First, it has to do with whether we can be connected to God and be accepted by him. This is so important because we saw last week that humans are made for him, we have an inherent need to be connected to him, and if that need is not met then we will never be whole. The problem is, if one is not righteous then one is not acceptable to God, not approved by him. If we are not righteous, we are the opposite, unrighteous, which is essentially the same as evil.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul asked a couple of obvious questions. “What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” Righteousness and wickedness, or evil, don’t have anything in common. They are polar opposites. You are all familiar with Venn diagrams that feature circles representing different ideas or areas. They are often used to represent relationships, correlations and commonality. Where the circles intersect there is overlap. But a Venn diagram of good and evil would have two completely separate circles, quite far apart from each other with no hint of any overlap. There is no place where evil and good intersect. The problem for us is, if we are not righteous, then we are unrighteous, meaning evil, and there can be no commonality with God because he is absolute good.

Paul said another way to look at it is light and darkness. How do the two of them get along and work together? They don’t. Recently Laurie and I had a chance to get away for a few days of relaxing in the Palm Desert area. Our first night there in the middle of the night Laurie woke up and felt the need to use the bathroom. But it was dark and we were in an unfamiliar place. On her way to the restroom she stumbled. She put her hand out to brace herself against the wall so she wouldn’t fall. However, where she put her hand happened to be a light switch. She hit that switch and the lights in the room blazed into life. I was sound asleep until it felt like I was suddenly hit with brilliant floodlights. I bolted awake and jerked up what felt like a foot off the bed. That was jarring reminder that where it is light, it is not dark, and where it is dark, it is not light. God is light, evil is darkness. Not being righteous means no fellowship with God, and that means we will never be whole.

Righteousness also hugely impacts our identity and sense of worth. To be declared righteous is to be declared approved, acceptable. To not have that stamp of righteousness means being unacceptable, rejected. It means being worthless. Psychologists tell us that the need for a sense of worth, of approval, is one of the most powerful and pervasive psychological and emotional drives we have. It actually touches every single thing we are and do. We are desperate to be declared righteous because it is the basis of our very identity, our sense of worth.

Our little granddaughter, Ella, loves to color. A couple of months back our granddaughters stayed with Laurie and me for a week. During that time Ella colored many pictures of various Disney princesses. Then she taped them up on the walls, especially in our bedroom. They were all over the place. After the girls went home Laurie took the pictures down. They were starting to fall off the walls anyway. A few weeks later the girls came over to our house for a day. Ella quickly asked why her pictures were not up anymore. We thought she would have forgotten all about that, but she had not. She expected our house to be a gallery of Ella art. Laurie explained that the tape lost its stickiness and the pictures were falling off the wall. But Ella’s feelings were hurt because she expected her pictures to be there still. What is that about? She took it as a statement that her art was not valued, and that meant that she was not valued. She was not approved. In other words, it was about righteousness.

This is a constant, powerful drive in every one of us. It has a huge impact on our sense of identity, our security, and our ability to be at peace with ourselves and with the world. Without being declared righteous our identity will always be a problem, we will be insecure and we will never be at peace.

Being declared approved and accepted, being declared righteous, is also essential for having hope for eternal life. Without being declared righteous we will never have that hope, and we will end up at some point with a terrible despair. Because of all these things we are continually striving for righteousness, for approval. We do it non-stop, because it is key to having a bearable human life.

Human nature and almost every system of thinking in the world has some form of what we need to do to gain that stamp of approval. They all operate from the idea that it is up to us to earn it in some way. The Gospel of grace is so revolutionary because it starts with what seems like bad news. The bad news is that we are all so corrupted that there is nothing we can do to gain righteousness. It is out of our reach. In fact, our efforts to gain righteousness actually have negative impacts on us and make us even more unrighteous. They actually get in the way of real righteousness.

The Gospel might sound at first like bad news, but it is actually the best news ever. It tells us the solution is to admit the truth, admit that we aren’t righteous, that we don’t deserve that stamp of approval. Jesus described that as being poor in spirit. It is only then that we can stop trying to prove how righteous we are. We must Give up on our attempts to establish a righteousness of our own so that we can receive what God offers us for free in Jesus Christ. As a gift, God says if we will put our faith in Jesus, he issues a stamp of approval to us. He declares us to be righteous before him because he credits the righteousness of Jesus to us. As we receive this gift by faith we are declared righteous, can now have fellowship with God, have the approval we’ve always needed so we can be at peace with who we are, and we have eternal life. It all comes as a package, a gift package, by faith in Christ.

This produces humility because admitting our true state is humbling, but also being given a priceless gift you don’t deserve is hugely humbling. An invariable and obvious mark of a person who grasps the kindness of God is profound humility. Along with that there will be gratitude to God, then peace, hope and rest. God’s grace gives us confidence, optimism about life, and enormous freedom. We are free to just be who we are, to just live and not have to prove or defend anything. We can be totally secure in who we are in Christ.

This is crucial because now as we think about how to live out that faith, about what God wants us to be and to do, we have a totally different motivation than we normally would have. Now we live out of gratitude to God who loves us more than we can comprehend, because we simply want to honor him because he is so good to us, and because we want to experience to the full true life, his full abundant life, the life of his Kingdom.

God’s instruction on how to live begins with a radical and challenging approach to life. It is a more demanding, instruction than any religion ever thought of. If we don’t have the Gospel ruling our every thought and driving everything we are and do, we will turn his instruction back into an effort to gain that stamp of approval, and we will lose all the peace, the freedom and the hope that comes from the gospel. We will turn it again into a futile and hypocritical pursuit for righteousness that will ruin our lives.

WE SACRIFICE OURSELVES

Here is where Paul says we start in our efforts to live as God wants us to live. “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” The ancient Jews knew sacrifices. They were constantly killing rams, bulls, lambs, doves. Here is one thing we know about the sacrifices of those animals. It was the last thing the animal did.

This reminds me of the old saying about the different perspectives of the pig and the chicken as they consider a breakfast of bacon and eggs The chicken makes a contribution. But the pig must go all in. For those animals there is a huge difference between what each of them gives. The chicken can contribute to breakfast over and over again. The pig does it once, and it never does anything else again. God wants us to continue living, but to do so with the kind of commitment that the pig makes. This is what God says is holy and it is what pleases him. Uh, that’s a pretty big commitment, don’t you think? Paul tells us we are to give our bodies as a living sacrifice. So this is just a physical thing? No, that is essentially a picturesque way of telling us to sacrifice everything we are and do to God. Every single thing I am and do involves my body. I take it everywhere I go. I can’t do anything without it. I can’t even think without my body. It requires my brain, which is part of the body. Paul is telling us that what God wants is to sacrifice every single thing we are and do to him.

What a place to start. No one is going to say after reading that, “Oh, is that all. No problem. I can do that easy.” Our efforts at religion usually take the form of, “How much do I have to do and how much can I keep for myself so I can do what I want?” We’re supposed to give some money to God. What percentage do I have to give to God? That means, how much do I get to keep for myself. Oh, I’m supposed to pray? How many times a day do I have to do that? Paul says we don’t even ask those questions because this is a totally different way of approaching life, a radical approach. It calls us to view everything we have as God’s. All our possessions, our time, our abilities, our thoughts, our words, our very bodies, all of it belongs to him to be used as he chooses.

That is absolutely contrary to how we live and think. The way our minds work is we are focused on ourselves and what we want and need. I saw a funny example of this with our two year old grandson, Wesley, recently. He has been having swimming lessons at the pool in our neighborhood. We have a toy fire truck at our house that he loves to play with. Even though he can’t take it in the pool, he wanted to have it there at the pool while he had his lesson. At the end of the lesson he let it be known that he wanted to take the fire truck in the car with him when he went home. He is kind of funny in that he is learning lots of words, and he can say the word “car,” but his word for car right now is “dah.” I guess that was the closest he could come when he was first learning to talk, and he is just used to it. Anyway, he said, “take red truck in dah.” His Mom said, “Yes, you can take the truck with you in the car, but we have to bring it back because it needs to stay here at Nana and Bapaw’s house.” He answered, “Take red truck in dah.” Mom said, “Yes, you can take it in the car.” Then he said, “Take red truck in dah, take red truck in dah.” For most of the time as they were packing up to go he kept repeating, “take red truck in dah,” even though his parents had already told him he could. He had to make sure he got what he wanted because it was so utterly important. This thing that he wanted had taken over his thoughts and he was on a campaign to make sure that would get what he wanted, because if he didn’t get it then life would hardly be worth living. He must have said, “Take red truck in dah” 50 times. I realize that hopefully we are not like two year olds, but the two year old and their struggles reveal something about the nature of humans. We are obsessed with what we want. That’s how our minds naturally work.

There is a big contrast in Philippians 3:8 where Paul said, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.” All those “red truck in dah” things we might get fixated on, Paul saw as garbage. Earlier in the chapter he had mentioned some things that were “gain” for him, all the things he lived for and took pride in. It had to do with his status as a respected leader, as a Pharisee, an up and coming star rabbi. Following Jesus meant losing all of it. It meant being despised, hated by people who had previously admired and praised him. He joyfully made that trade and viewed all the self-oriented stuff that had previously driven him, all the status, all the financial rewards, the respect and acclaim, as a pile of trash. He sacrificed it all willingly.

In Philippians 2:17 he wrote, “Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” A drink offering was a kind of sacrifice. I think maybe my favorite drink might be fresh squeezed orange juice. I don’t drink a lot of it because it is hard to produce, and buying it is very expensive. However, I love it. Toby and Anna have an absurdly prolific orange tree in their yard and they give us bags of oranges. Recently Laurie got out the juicer and used it to produce some of that fresh juice. What a delight. I savor every drop of it. But imagine Laurie makes a nice big pitcher of fresh squeezed orange juice, and then I just dump it out on the ground. What a waste! She’d yell, “What are you doing? All that work for nothing!” Paul meant that many people might view his life that way. What had living for Christ resulted in for him? Repeated beatings, shipwrecks, unjust imprisonment, rejection from his own people, hatred, riots, poverty, hardship and now possibly the loss of his life. Great, where do I sign up for that plan? What if that’s what being a living sacrifice meant for us? I doubt people would be standing in line to sign up for it. But look at what Paul thought about it. He said, “Even if that’s true, even if most people think my life is like dumping precious juice on the ground and wasting it, I am glad and I rejoice. In other words, it has all been worth it. It has been, and continues to be, great.”

Being a living sacrifice means I am no longer about me and my worth, but about God’s worth. Why does it rankle so much when someone cuts us off while driving? Why does that bother us so much? Yes, we are concerned about safety, but that doesn’t explain how much emotion erupts in us, why it feels personal. Why does that happen? It’s because it feels to us like that person is saying, “You don’t matter. What I want matters, but you are not important.” We can’t stand that. Any time someone tells us we don’t matter or treats us in a fashion that even hints at that, we become upset and offended. That’s because, as we saw earlier, our worth, mattering, is one of our most powerful drives. But being a living sacrifice means living for God’s worth, for his honor and glory, and not caring even a tiny little bit for mine. This is why Paul could say in 1 Corinthians 4:13, “We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world” and not particularly care about it. So what if people think I’m scum? I could care less. I’m not about me and my value, I’m about God’s value.

Being a living sacrifice means living for God’s agenda and his priorities, not for mine. It means living for his ways of relating people and doing things, not for mine. But why should we choose to live as sacrifices when it is so unnatural and often very difficult? What if it results in even a small percentage of what it meant for Paul, being mistreated, misunderstood, opposed, despised and enduring poverty and hardship?

In his book, *From Guilt To Glory* Volume II, Ray Stedman wrote, “If you use your body for yourself, you will misuse it, abuse it. You will use it for things the body was never intended for. Or you will destroy it or hurt it.” In other words, when we live following our natural human instincts to live for self, we end up somehow destroying our own lives. God tells us to sacrifice ourselves and live for him because in doing so we actually live in the way that produces true inner life. This is why Paul could rejoice in the middle of many hardships and much suffering, because he found real life. This ends up being a life and death matter. We can do what is natural, live for self, and die, or we can be a living sacrifice to God and find life as we long to have it.

A second reason we should choose to live as sacrifices is that it has the same effect on others as it does on us. In other words, just as living for self causes harm and loss to ourselves, so it causes harm and loss to other people. Just think about the driver who cut you off on the road. He is living for himself. He does what suits him best rather than thinking of others. This causes loss for others, at the very least a momentary loss of joy and peace. Recently Laurie and I were talking about a marriage seminar that we had heard about. We discussed some of the things that might go into a marriage seminar, and at one point she said, “It all really comes back to one thing. It’s not serving your self.” She was absolutely right. All marriage issues start with serving self. Serving self creates huge pain and conflict in marriages. In the end most of human suffering stems from human beings serving self. It makes sense, then, that the way we can keep from doing harm to others is by being living sacrifices to God.

WE WORSHIP

In the final words of this verse Paul tells us that being living sacrifices is our “true and proper worship.” There is one Greek word translated “true and proper.” It is the word *logikos*, from which we get logical. In various translations it is translated reasonable, rational, spiritual and logical. It means this is the way to worship God that makes sense, that fits.

One day we were at the beach. I saw several pelicans flying over the water. They were gliding just above the surface of the water. It was beautiful to watch them as they would glide up over a swell as it came along. This is what pelicans are made to do. In a sense, they are fulfilling God’s plan for them, and as they do it they bring honor to him by doing what is fitting for a pelican. Paul is telling us this is what fits us. We are made by God to be living sacrifices to him, and as we live in this way we bring honor to him. We worship him that way. This is what suits us.

Remember that at the end of chapter 11 Paul had said that all things are made for God, then he wrote, “To him be the glory forever.” All of creation is intended to be a glorious and beautiful symphony. It is to work together to bring honor to the Creator. We fulfill our part when we are living sacrifices.

This is what we were put on earth to do. I think it interesting that people do all sorts of things to “find themselves.” They are looking for something, an identity, a reason for their existence. They will only find it when they become living sacrifices, for this is why we are here. We need a purpose, and the only one that will truly fulfill is the one we were created for. That is to live for the glory of God. Live to worship him.

But worship is a much misunderstood concept. Many times I have heard people say they like a particular church because the worship there is so good. I hate to pop that bubble, but that’s pretty close to saying they like it because they put on a good show. Pay attention to what this verse says. Our fitting worship is to be a living sacrifice every day. It is to give ourselves, body and soul, to God, every day of our lives. Serving him in our daily interactions and experiences is true worship.

APPLICATION

THE MERCY OF GOD IS ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL

I will repeat what I said earlier. If the mercy and grace of God is not at the very core of our thinking, if it is not the presupposition in everything we think and do, the reason behind what we do and the principle that guides how we do it, then that will create problems. We will turn what we see in the remainder of Romans into a bunch of laws. It will kill our ability to get anywhere close to living as God wants us to live.

Last year Laurie and I were going on an airline flight. When I went on line to check in and get our boarding passes I saw an offer to get premium seats, which provide a few inches of extra leg room. This last minute offer had a very reasonable cost. I told Laurie I would look into it. I investigated and found that there were a number of seats available, but none of them were together. I didn’t want to have a little extra legroom but not be able to sit with Laurie, so I passed on it. I told her it wasn’t going to work. During this time she was finishing packing her bag. We were only taking carry on bags so we didn’t have to check any bags through.

As we were driving to the airport she said, “I don’t understand why you have to have checked luggage in order to buy premium seats.” I was dumbfounded. And I was confused. I thought I had misunderstood her, so I asked what she meant. I hadn’t misunderstood. Somehow, she thought I had said we couldn’t get premium seats because we were only bringing carry on bags. I still don’t know how that happened. But her assumption that was what I said resulted in confusion and a totally wrong conclusion. If we don’t start with the right presupposition, which is that the mercy and grace of God is the core of everything, if it is not our given, then our conclusions will all be wrong and there will be lots of confusion and failure.

WORSHIP IS THE POINT OF LIFE

This is really a point drawn from the end of chapter 11, but it becomes a crucial concept in this verse. We are on earth to give glory to God. That is our reason for existing. It is the key to being a fully formed human being. In his classic novel *The Brothers Karamozov*, Dostoevski wrote, “So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship.” We will worship something or someone. We have no choice in that. But if we choose the wrong thing or person to worship we unravel our own souls and lives.

We will never be truly alive and free until we understand that. This is why Paul tells us that the reasonable and rational way to worship God is to be a living sacrifice. It is because he assumes that this will be the crucial question for us. Understanding that this is what makes life become full and whole, we want to know how to do it.

WE WORSHIP WITH OUR LIVES EVERY DAY

A few days ago as we got in our car I noticed how dirty it was. It bothered me a little bit. It felt to me like our car was saying, “Hey, why don’t you get me washed? You’re making me look bad. I’m ashamed of how dirty I am.” I felt a bit guilty about it. Then we parked right next to a car the same color as ours and it was much dirtier than our car. I said, “Look at that. You’re much better than that car. See how dirty it is?” It said, “Really? That’s the best you’ve got? I may be bad but I’m not as bad as that one?” I admitted that was pretty weak.

But then I realized that the car was getting a little uppity. It doesn’t seem to know its place. That car exists to serve us. That’s its only reason for being. If I choose to keep it dirty, that’s my business. Hey, in these drought conditions I’m being environmentally correct. It’s not my car’s place to question my motives and decisions. Its job is to serve as I want it to serve. If it refuses to start when I want it to start, or if it fails to go where I want it to go, or if it somehow decides to start and go places on its own, then it is a useless vehicle that either needs serious repair or is fit for the junkyard.

And that is how we are to see ourselves before God. We exist to serve him. We go when he tells us to go, and stop when he tells us to stop. If he chooses to have us live in a condition that we think makes us look bad, then we regard that as his business, thank him and move on. This should be our approach to everything in life. It rules in our relationships, how we treat people, in our priorities, in our use of our money, our abilities, our possessions, in everything we have and everything we do. When God presses the start button, we start. When God hits the brakes, we stop. When God turns the steering wheel to the right, we turn right. We exist to do his will and nothing else. And when we do that we are worshiping him. We should note the word translated “worship” here also means “serve.”