

All to the Glory of God
Romans 11:33-12:2

These were the great emphases of the Protestant Reformation, a movement that started 500 years ago. Scripture alone is our sufficient rule of faith and practice. Salvation is a gift of God's free grace alone to unworthy, helpless sinners. God saves sinners through faith alone in Christ alone, those who trust the perfect sacrifice of Jesus to pay the death penalty we deserve, and trusting Him to live the perfect life of obedience we cannot live.

And we would very much like to stop there, wouldn't we? It's so wonderful to meditate on the gift of eternal life that God graciously bestows on us. It's so reassuring to cling to the faithful witness of the Holy Scriptures to this amazing promise, just as we have sung since we were little children – Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.

But there was one more central truth that the Reformers found in the pages of Scripture, one more part of Biblical doctrine they found essential to the Christian experience – the way those who have been forgiven of their sins should live after they have been saved, the purpose for which we have been given salvation. They summarized a proper response to God's truth and grace this way: All to the Glory of God.

But what exactly does this mean? I suppose when we think about the glory of God, it is most natural for our thoughts to turn to worship. And it is true that as we lift up our prayers and our praises, as we meditate on God's Holy Word, we are giving Him the glory He alone deserves. Paul came to the same conclusion, as we see in the last few verses of chapter 11. "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" He may not have understood why God would choose to save people like him, just as we may not understand why God would want to save people like us. But we can worship God for the riches of His mercy, and for His unsearchable wisdom and knowledge – and that's what we should be doing every Sunday morning – and really every day of the week.

But there's another response we can make to God's mercy – a response of obedience. Oh, we may not understand some of God's commandments any more than we understand His mercy and grace. Some of the things God tells us to do run completely contrary to our reason and our experience. Love my enemies? Turn the other cheek after someone hits me? Really? But if the Scriptures teach us that God has saved us by His grace in spite of what we deserve, and if we know that God has told us to do certain things, obeying God is the least that we can do, whether his commands make sense to us or not.

And so we come to the "therefore" which begins chapter 12. Therefore – because of all the great truths Paul has been teaching throughout this book, because sinners like us have been saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we should seek to obey God. In other words, we should not seek to live perfect lives because we are afraid of damnation if we make a mistake. We should not render grudging allegiance to a God whom we fear. No, we should not obey God in order to be saved. We should obey God with grateful hearts because He has saved us by His grace. We should obey God as a way of expressing our love for Him and our faith in Him.

But how exactly are we to obey God? What is it that God wants us to do? Paul tells us in the same verse that our obedience must not only be with our minds. Instead, we must glorify God, we must obey with our bodies.

Now, this may not come as such a great surprise to us. We modern Americans place quite a bit of emphasis on our bodies. We devote quite a bit of our time and money to staying in good physical shape, from the hours we spend at the gym to the dollars we spend on health insurance. But to Paul's Gentile readers, who had been raised on the Greek philosophy taught by people like Plato, the physical part of us was not very important. They thought that the mind was what mattered most, and the body was just a nuisance, an impediment to pure thoughts.

Paul's Jewish readers, of course, were much more advanced in their understanding. To Jews, the concept of a "soul" has always included the physical as well as the spiritual. To prove this point, you only need to turn back to Genesis 2:7, the story of the creation of Adam. For after all, it wasn't enough for God to shape the dust of the ground into the form of a man. That wasn't sufficient to make that dust into a living soul. No, it was also necessary for God to breathe the breath of life into Adam. It is the breath, the wind, the Spirit of God that uniquely created human beings in the image of God. But we must also remember that the dust of the ground was just as necessary for Adam to live as was the Spirit of God. Adam was not just spirit and not just flesh – he was a blending of the two. For human beings, our bodies and spirits are both integral parts of us – until death divides them.

But even that's not the end of the story for us Christians. For we are Easter people, people who claim the certain truth of the empty tomb. We believe, we know that Jesus walked out of His tomb, not as a disembodied spirit, but as a physical, living Lord. And we believe, we know that He ascended to the right hand of the Father, that His physical body is right now in the presence of God. And we believe, we know that this same kind of physical, bodily resurrection awaits all those who trust in Christ, all those who are saved by God's grace through faith in Him.

And so, if our bodies are integral parts of our being, and if our bodies are going to live forever in the presence of the Lord Jesus, doesn't it just stand to reason that our worship, the way we give glory to God should include everything we do with our bodies? So it should come as no surprise that the following chapters of Romans have much to say about what we might consider to be rather mundane things, from the taxes that we pay to the food we eat. It should come as no surprise that the God who made us body and soul, the God Who saved us by the physical sacrifice of the Lord Jesus does in fact care about what we do with our bodies.

That's why Paul says that offering ourselves in obedience to God is our reasonable, or rational service. The Greek word here is "logikos," and it is indeed logical to give to God all that we are and all that we have, since Jesus gave no less for us.

But what exactly does it mean to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice? Well, it doesn't mean that God wants us to burn ourselves up on altars – Jesus already laid down His life for us so we would not have to do something like that. No, ours must be a living sacrifice, an attempt to live all of life as the Reformers said for the glory of God. Everything we think, everything we say, everything we do, and everything we feel must have God as our point of reference, as our goal, as our meaning, as our purpose. As

Paul put it at the end of verse 11, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”

But make no mistake: even though we are called to make such a living sacrifice, this won't be easy. After all, verse 2 tells us that we are not to be conformed to the world. That means we are not called to coast along with what the unbelieving world around us thinks is right. And that's because the world, when taken as a whole, is not at all interested in doing what pleases God. Since Christians have been called out of darkness into light, out of death into life, we have no business acting in worldly ways anymore. Instead, we are called to be countercultural, to obey God instead of doing what feels good or makes sense to us, to swim upstream against the tide of public opinion.

And this is the same point that Paul makes back in Romans chapter 6. There, he reminds us that our baptism into Christ means that we have died to sin and everything that belongs to it. Yes, we've been forgiven but that doesn't mean we have a license to go on living in worldly ways. Instead our reasonable service is to walk, to live in newness of life.

And Romans 6 gives us a hint as to how such transformed living is possible: through union with Christ. Paul makes it plain that the reason we are no longer slaves of sin is because we have died with Christ and have risen with Him. Our old man has been crucified with Christ. Thus, in a very real sense, we are totally different people than we were before Christ came into our lives. Because Christ's spirit lives within us, we have been transformed.

And how does this process of transformation begin? Well, however much our new life must include what we do with our bodies, our new life actually begins not so much with our actions as with our thoughts. In verse 2, Paul tells us that our minds must be renewed so that we might be able to understand and test and discern what it is that God wants us to do in each particular situation that faces us from day to day.

Now, this kind of discernment is not easy, is it? Knowing what is good or acceptable to God is not always obvious. Some decisions are rather dramatic, as when young missionaries decide to leave their homes and their jobs to plant churches among Syrian refugees or in poor places in the Sertao. Other decisions may be more subtle – how should I spend the time and money God has entrusted to me? And we'll think through some of these specific areas of life in the next few weeks as we study the following chapters of this book.

But if we really believe what the Reformers told us, if we really believe what Paul has told us, that we have been miraculously saved by God's grace, if we really believe that the reasonable response to this grace is to offer all that we are and all that we have as a sacrifice to God, well, those decisions will take on a whole different tone, won't they? For if that kind of fundamental gratitude informs our lives, we won't begrudge any of the time, talent and treasure God calls us to give. Instead, we'll be eager to do whatever we can to further the work of the Kingdom of God in Northeast Brazil, in Lebanon, in New Braunfels and Austin, Texas, and right here where we live.