

***What Does the Lord Require?
Offering God Your Everyday, Ordinary Life***

Romans 12:1-8

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“Therefore,” says Paul. I don’t know about you, but when I see the word “therefore,” I want to see what it’s there for. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he has spent the first several chapters dealing with our fallen human nature, and God’s work of salvation through Jesus Christ. In a style that is reminiscent of a debate, Paul anticipates and then knocks down opposing arguments. Paul has spilt no small amount of ink in convincing us, not only of the extent of our sinfulness and its effects of us, but also the manner in which God has completely conquered our sin and redeemed us in Jesus Christ.

And so now that Paul has made all his arguments about the power of God to save us by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, Paul is ready to tell us how this makes a difference in our lives. “Therefore, in view of God’s mercy...” he says. Therefore, because God has saved you and transformed you heart and soul, here’s the right way to live your life.

You see, if Paul had not first told us what God has done to save us, if Paul had not first shared with us the redeeming work of Christ, then his exhortations to follow would be hollow ethics. If we don’t first recognize the goodness and mercy of God, then the call to offer our lives as living sacrifices becomes little more than moralistic preaching. You have to have something on which to base the exhortation to live a new kind of life. That something is the unmerited mercy and grace that God has shown to us in Jesus Christ. Paul is saying, “Therefore, because of what God has done for you, here is how you ought to live in response...” And what Paul urges us to do is to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates this verse: “Here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God.”¹ When it’s put that way, can’t you see what Paul says in a different light? Can’t you see that Paul is calling for us to reflect on what God has done for us, and to give thanks? And the best way we can do “thanks giving” is through “thanks living”.

Think about what God has done for you, and be thankful. Let your thankfulness be evident in the way you live your life. Offer yourself as a living sacrifice. Take your life, and everything you do, everything you say, everything you are--and make it an offering to God. What Paul is saying here, and what Micah says in our theme verse for stewardship--is that the way we live our lives matters. God is not interested in having us nod in assent to the right theology. God is not interested in whether or not we simply follow the rules of right living. What God wants is that our lives demonstrate the transforming power of his love. God wants us to live a life that flows from a grateful heart.

In our world, we tend to focus on the spectacular. The superstars are the ones who impress us. The best athletes, the most beautiful actors and actresses, the most powerful politicians--these are the ones we lift up as exemplary. But none of that matters to God. What matters to God is faithfulness in our everyday, ordinary lives. What matters to God is our faithfulness in our sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life.

And that's precisely our stewardship focus this year. More than just a matter of dollars and cents, stewardship applies to how we use everything that God has given to us. The truth is, God has given each of us as a gift to this world. Faithful stewardship will ensure that we not squander that gift. Faithful stewardship will ensure that we invest every bit of our lives in the service of God.

I have a great wall hanging in my office. It is a quote from Erma Bombeck, painted on bright colors on a piece of wood. The quote is this: "When I stand before God at the end of my life I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, 'I have used everything you gave me.'"

Can you say that? Is it your heart's desire to stand before God and hope that you would not have left a single bit of talent unused? Can you say to God, "I have used everything you gave me"?

Few things are more beautiful than a life that is lived out of love for God. Frederick William Faber notes that "Brightly colored sunsets and starry heavens, majestic mountains and shining seas, and fragrant fields and fresh-cut flowers are not even half as beautiful as a soul who is serving Jesus out of love, through the wear and tear of an ordinary, un-poetic life."²

Philip Gulley is a Quaker pastor from Indiana. He tells of the time when his church board bought a used bus. The bus had belonged to a rock band called "Venom". The band members wore leather pants and had rattlesnakes tattooed on their chests. Their songs were loud and the words were hard to understand, except for the cuss words, which they sang out loudly and frequently.

The band's bus broke down while they were driving through the small town of Harmony in which Gulley was a pastor, and it was towed to Harvey Muldock's garage. It took Harvey two weeks to get the parts. In the meantime, the band gave up waiting, and simply abandoned the bus. Dale Hinshaw, one of the elders at the Harmony Friends Meeting House, suggested that the church buy the bus and use it in a transportation ministry. They bought the bus for the price of the repairs. They repainted the bus--by hand--and painted the words, "Follow Me to Harmony Friends Meeting" on the rear emergency exit. If you looked closely, though, you could still see the word "Venom" and a rattlesnake through the new paint job.

Two weeks after the church bought the bus, it broke down again. They had it towed to the church parking lot, where it sat outside Pastor Gulley's window for four years. One day Gulley saw in the regional Quaker newsletter a prayer request from Brother Norman in Oklahoma. Gulley described Brother Norman as "a nice guy, but not the brightest bulb in the chandelier." When he'd graduated from seminary, no church would have him, so the superintendent talked with Brother Norman about impacting the world as a missionary to the Choctaw Indians and the superintendent sent Brother Norman to Oklahoma. Brother Norman accepted the call, and he slowly but surely built a ministry among the Choctaws. Every month he sent in his prayer requests for publication in the regional newsletter. On this particular month, Brother Norman was asking that people pray for a bus so he could have a ministry among the Choctaw youth.

Gulley took that as a sign from God, and he quickly made arrangements to have the bus fixed up and delivered to Brother Norman. On their way to the reservation, they stopped off in St. Louis and caught the Cardinals game when Mark McGwire broke the home run record. The next morning they arrived on the

reservation, and Brother Norman and the Choctaw youth were awaiting with excitement. Before Gulley and his elders left, Brother Norman showed them all the things he had been able to build for the Choctaw over the years; he was so proud of his ministry.

As Gulley thought back about the trip, including the baseball game and the tour of the reservation, he thought of how everybody is so busy cheering the Mark McGwires of the world, and we overlook the Brother Normans. Yet it is Brother Norman who daily offers himself to his Lord, never straying, always praying, and impacting the world one Choctaw youth at a time.³

Few things are more beautiful than a life that is lived out of love for God. The most saintly souls are the Brother Normans of our world--people who have not distinguished themselves in the eyes of the world. They are the ones who have quietly lived a life of holiness and love.

This is the season of thanksgiving. It is good to give thanks to the Lord. Even in the midst of a stressful time as a nation, it is good to give thanks to the Lord.

But this I urge you: Do not limit your thanksgiving to a few words spoken with heads bowed around a freshly-carved turkey. Take your thanks-giving, and make it thanks-living. Let your lives be transformed by the knowledge of God's love for you.

What does the Lord require of you? Take your everyday, ordinary life--and offer it to God. That is the way of faithful stewardship.

Amen.

¹ Romans 12:1, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson

² F. W. Faber, quoted in L. B. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert*, Nov. 12.

³ Philip Gulley, *Home to Harmony*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), pp. 97-108.