

“Wholly His”

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Series: *Romans*

Bible Text: Romans 12:1-8

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If you have a Bible, you can be making your way to the New Testament Book of Romans. We have printed the passage for you in your worship guide if you need it. We're in Romans 12, 1 through 8 this morning. If you have been with us, you know that we've been working our way through this letter from Paul to the church in Rome. You also know that this is one of the more intensely theological letters in the New Testament by design. It's supposed to be that way. The big theme over 11 chapters is the gospel. He's been unfolding various aspects of that good news for 11 chapters. Largely, he's been telling us what God has done for us already in Christ. And today he pivots, building on everything he's said so far. Now he begins to say, or to answer the so what question. So what do we do about it? So how are we supposed to live? So how should this change things for us? So let's read. And remember, this is God's word to his people, even to us. Romans 12, 1 through 8.

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function,

5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;

7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching;

8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Father, you know what we need. We need to hear from you and more than just with our natural ears and brain, you've made us whole people and we need the help of your spirit to understand and apply and feel and begin to live out what your word says to us. So come, Holy Spirit, and be our teacher. Help us, oh Lord, to desire to give the whole of our lives to you because of your mercy. We pray through Christ our Lord, amen.

I suppose you've had this experience before. You go to a store and you need someone who works there to help you find something. So here's the progression. Here's how that works. First you look and you look and you look and where are the people who work here? Maybe perhaps they're hiding. You finally find someone and it's clear that they work here. They have a uniform, the telltale sign. They get paid money to show up to this place and to know enough about where things are and what you might need to offer you that expertise. They get paid money to do that and so you found the person. They have the uniform. You have a need. They know how to supply. Ask your question and they speak to you as if this is the greatest inconvenience to their life and purpose that has ever happened. How dare you ask them to work while they're at work? Or their tone conveys to you that this happened to me recently, that if you weren't such an idiot you would have already found what you were looking for. This one was fresh in my memory. Worst case scenario, the person with the uniform has no idea what you're talking about, can't help you find the thing that you're looking for and you're just back to square one already. I have no specific store in mind by the way, equal opportunity offender on this one but this is the classic person of the guy who has the job and doesn't want to be there. They get paid to do these things but they assume that they need to withhold their effort, that somehow their efforts and their energies need to be directed elsewhere, not here in this job.

If you're like me, that drives you crazy and it's also possible that you have had days at work where if the truth were told, that might be you, where it's a bad day and it's hard to muster the energy to do the thing that the uniform requires. You also maybe, more rarely, have experienced people who throw themselves into their work and they're enthusiastic and they're incredibly helpful and they know the things they're supposed to know and man, this was a great experience and you feel like how do I tell your boss that you did a great job today? That happens sometimes.

I think this dynamic is very, very present within the church, within the people of God that we've been given this uniform, we know that it's more than a uniform, we've been given this, it's not just a job, it's more than a job, we've been given this status, a robe of righteousness that clothes us, we're called a new creation, the very children of God Almighty and there are days when we struggle to give ourselves over completely to everything that that means and to live out exactly what that should look like, which is why Paul has to actually say what he says in our passage today.

In this passage what we see is that if you do belong to God, this is a no holding back sort of situation. If you belong to God by his mercy, you are called to give yourself wholly, W-H-O-L-L-Y to him in every capacity and he mentions too that this will make up our outline for today, we're called to give ourselves wholly to God in worship and work, so let's talk about each of those things.

It does make sense that Paul would talk about worship at this point, if you were here last week, he ended chapter 11 with something called a doxology, that's not just the thing that we sing at a point in the service, a doxology is an expression of praise to God. After all the theological reflection, Paul ended that with an expression of praise and now he, the word is, he appeals, urges, exhorts them by the mercies of God to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, wholly and acceptable to God. That's worship language, it recalls all the Old Testament imagery. If you've experienced the mercy of God, which refers us back to everything he said so far, by saying the mercies of God, he's recalling the fact that we were sinful beyond all belief and that God showed us mercy in Christ and that Jesus died and provided a righteousness for us that we couldn't get for ourselves, he's recalling the gospel.

If you have experienced the mercy of God, it makes sense that you now would give your body over to him as what he calls a living sacrifice. That's strange language. If you've spent any time in the Old Testament, almost any time at all, you know one thing, there are no living sacrifices, right? They kill the animals and then they burn them and there's a lot of reasons why they do that, there were things that they were setting in place then that are part for another sermon, but sacrifices were not living and now they are. A Christian is to present his or her entire body, really entire self to God as a living offering. What that conveys is the idea of a perpetual, continual sort of sacrifice. That we're devoted to him like those burnt offerings were devoted to him, but it's in such a way that we aren't consumed and it's over. We are continually, perpetually giving ourselves over to him in the whole of life, constantly offered. So what that means is that there's no part of your life that you're given permission to hold back and to keep for yourself, and he says that we are to be wholly and acceptable sacrifices as well.

But again, we're in chapter 12, not chapter 1 and so Paul's made it clear there's only one wholly and acceptable one and that's Jesus, but if you belong to him, you are united to him such that when you offer yourself, united to Christ, you are offering a wholly and acceptable sacrifice to God. That that's actually who you are now in your union with Jesus. You are wholly and acceptable.

There's an old word for this that you'll see periodically in the Bible. We don't really use it much anymore. It's the word consecration. In the Old Testament, that's a word for someone or something that's set aside, kind of devoted over for God's use, for his name, for his purposes. Every Christian, in your union with Christ, is to be completely consecrated to God himself. And Paul says that when you do that, when you offer your life, your body as a living sacrifice, it is your spiritual or true worship. That word there can also mean reasonable or rational. It's the idea that our worship of God is not just ritual only. That we are united mind, heart, and will in reverence and submission to God, which means it's not just the things that we go through on a Sunday morning, singing, confessing, hearing a sermon, taking the Lord's Supper. It's not less than that. Those are vital importance. But true worship is more expansive than that. It's the giving of the whole self over to God continually and constantly.

So it's right to say what we do on Sunday morning is worship. But all of life, all of your being is to be worship. Because you've given yourself over to him like a never consumed burnt offering consistently presented to him as an act of worship.

All right. If you do that, if that's what you, if you begin to grapple with, okay, I think I get that. Like, I don't belong to myself anymore. I've given my whole life over to God now. It means change. And this is where things start to get a little, a little tricky and treacherous for us. Look at what he says. There's a negative side, verse two. If you're a living sacrifice, giving yourself over, *do not be conformed to this world*.

Now, we know this, the way he's using the word there doesn't mean do not pay your taxes or mortgage payments are not applying to you or something like that. That's not what he means. He means the world as a system that stands against God, right, that the fallen world is systemically anti-God, which means that every day the voices around you coming through whatever channels are going to try to lull you to sleep or to convince you that there is no God or maybe there is a God, but they're going to try to convince you that that he's not worth your worship or dismissive or his ways are antiquated and foolish. Either way, it's a system constantly pressuring the people of God to be against him. And Paul's saying that the world is not neutral. It's not just a blank slate and we impress upon it whatever we want. No, no. As a Christian, every day that you wake up, the world is against you. It is trying to conform you into its image and to corrupt everything that is holy and right and good in the image of God, which is why he says, *do not be conformed*.

Okay, so, but we live in the world, right? This is where we're called to live right now. So how do we not be conformed to it? He tells us by being *transformed by the renewal of your mind*. So resisting the world means that we have to be changed and change begins with the renewal of our mind, which means a lot of things. We've got to reject falsehood, accept what's true. Paul speaks of this elsewhere that the process of renewing our mind for a Christian involves the continual input of God's word applied by the Holy Spirit. Very often we are praying it into lived experience, asking God to press it in and make it take root. And it doesn't really end this side of heaven. This is one of those constants in the Christian life.

Wouldn't it be nice if you become a Christian and, you know, they hand you the information chip, you plug it in, you get all the information you need and boom, go. Faithful Christian life for the rest of your days. Would be nice, but it's not how it's offered, not realistic. And there are reasons why it actually wouldn't be nice.

We're called every day until we're dead to resist conformity to the world and to be transformed into the image of Jesus by having our mind renewed according to God's word by the help of the Spirit.

It's why we're here. It's why we read the Bible every Sunday. It's why we preach through the Bible. It's why God calls us to this morning and evening pattern very often of reading and prayer those spiritual disciplines. It's because our minds aren't neutral and the world's not neutral.

You are constantly being disciplined. I'm constantly being disciplined every day. Something is trying to make me into its image, and the only question is who wins the war today, and who wins the war tomorrow? And three weeks from now, who wins the war then? Whatever we hear and see and read, whatever we listen to, we are called now to run everything through the grid of God's truth and evaluate it.

When we devote ourselves to resisting conformity to the world, being transformed in our minds, something begins to happen. We grow wise. The way Paul says it is that we become able to discern the will of God.

Some of you've been a college student, and you've been in that place in your life where you've, that's been your question. What is the will of God for my life? You want God to just like drop it in a fortune cookie or something for me next time I go to a Chinese restaurant or write it in the sky so I can figure it out. What Paul's saying here is that if you want to know the will of God for your life, you're going to have to continually have your mind renewed according to his word.

There are plenty of things that he makes abundantly clear to us. Your vocation? No. I mean, he'll work that out. But he's going to make clear to you all of the things that are, see what he says, good, acceptable, and perfect. He'll make known all of those things. He'll make known his will to you as your mind is renewed according to his word. This is whole life stuff, all of life, giving ourselves over wholly to God in worship.

Let me just acknowledge an experience here that you've probably had. There was a hymn that we sang in my church growing up called I Surrender All. Anybody know this? Several nodding heads. All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give. I will ever love and trust him in his presence daily live. When I became a little older and I think became a Christian, sort of college age, I really did not like singing that because it felt fake and it felt untrue for me. The only way that I could sing that in good conscience would be some to Jesus I surrender, some to him I freely give, I will sometimes love and trust him, in his presence sometimes live. Right? Because that's the Christian experience as people who still wrestle with sin. But that song is a consecration song, a call to willfully give our whole self over to Jesus. I think I could sing it now. It's not a declaration of how you're doing, it's an aspiration of what you want to be true in your life. You know, you grow up, you get a little more mature and you stop being against the old songs that are actually better than you thought they were, right? Constant surrender, constant seeking to live a life of worship.

Two dangers. Sometimes we read these verses and we do a mental judo move and we flip the whole book of Romans upside down and we say, okay, so if I can present my body to God as a living sacrifice and try to not be conformed to the world and get my mind renewed enough, then God will be merciful to me and I'll know his love and favor toward me. And there are many Christians who try to live that way, and they'll do it for a season and then they'll usually give up because it turns out we're pretty bad at giving our lives over to God. And so we just feel like, yeah, he's never really going to love me or accept me.

That's a great way to live a defeated Christian life. And many people end up leaving the gospel because what they've done in that move is they've flipped it upside down and have misunderstood it. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. It's by the mercies of God that you present your life as a living sacrifice. Meaning until you know the mercy of God in the gospel, you can't live a faithful life before God. It's impossible. It can't be done. You have to know his mercy before you can ever want to become a merciful person.

And I would say that to you, if you're here and you're not yet a Christian, you may very well be trying to live a very moral and good life. And if we pressed you, you might be, you might say something like, yeah, I hope to do enough that I can kind of get by. Doesn't work that way. Can't work that way. Also, and I hate to bust the bubble, but we're not that good. We're just not that good. And we really never will be. You've got to reckon with that in your own life. You've got to reckon with the fact that you are not that good. Neither am I. And we have to have the mercy of God or nothing. His mercy is to send his perfect Holy Son to die in the place of sinners and to rise in such a way that he would defeat death and sin and the devil himself. And that if you call on the name of the Lord, he'll save you. We'd love to talk to you about that if that's where you're at.

So that's one danger. Here's the other. Having a view of the gospel that is distorted to get to this place where you would say, I really think that God accepts me and loves me. I think he's for me. I don't really think he cares how I live. I think I kind of can do whatever I want. And this is more alive and well in American Christianity than we would ever admit. Think about it this way. The lives of many professing Christians look absolutely no different from the lives of their non-believer next door neighbor. Yet Paul says, do not be conformed, be transformed.

So I'll ask this question. Does your life show any evidence of a commitment or a lifestyle change or even a stand because God has called you to be different from the world around you? Is there any evidence of that in your life? Another way to say it is that if you're his, you can't hold back any aspect of your life from him. And you can't chalk it up to, I didn't know, it's a gray area. You can be renewed in your mind and be able to discern what the will of God is.

What might you be tempted to hold back? That's a good question to sit with for a little bit.

He can have my job, but he can't have my finances. My money is my own.

He can have my kids and my wife, but he can't have my time. My time is my own. Nobody tells me what to do with my time.

He can have my church attendance, but not my service. I just don't have the energy.

He can have my time and energy and money, but he can't have my kids because I don't know what he's going to do with them.

Ask yourself that question. What might you be holding back right now? What might you have taken off the altar of living sacrifice? What might be off limits to God?

Let me suggest to us that where we find that, there's the evidence of that conformity to the world. Because the world is always going to come to you and say, you better take care of yourself because no one else is coming to your aid. And meanwhile, it's Jesus who says, come to me and I'll give you rest. And the world around us is going to say, get yours. That's all that matters. Get something for yourself. And Jesus says, no, no, no. Give up everything that you have because you have everything that you'll ever need in me. We're His. We give ourselves wholly to Him in a lifestyle of worship.

All right. That's the worship side of things. He gets all of us, nothing held back. Here's the other side, though, in the passage, we not only give ourselves to Him in our worship, we give ourselves to Him in our work, in what we do. Let's look at that.

There's a flow from verse two to verse three. If your mind is being renewed and you begin to discern the will of God, things that are good and acceptable and perfect, you'll also begin to think rightly about yourself. Paul says he's been given grace as an apostle to tell everyone in Rome and beyond who belonged to Christ not to think more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. This is Paul pleading with them to humble self-thought, that the Christian is called to sober thinking, sobriety and how we how we even think of ourselves. And he says that this right thinking is related to a measure of faith.

Now, you probably heard this before. I've heard this before. I've heard this explained as God might give you a lot of faith, but he's only given me a little bit of faith, kind of a measuring cup mentality like you get three quarters and I only get a half and we just kind of have to deal with it. And I'm just not convinced that that's what he's talking about here. I'm not sure that sure faith can be expressed. You know, sometimes you're weak and sometimes you're strong. But I don't think there's like a measuring cup mentality. It seems as though he's launching into this discussion of their giftedness for use inside the church.

And so what he's saying is that in the Christian faith, you have been given a measure of faith for use. And you're going to need to think in humble terms about yourself, because whatever you were given, God is the one who gave it to you. And he gave it to you to use.

Let's look at this and see if that's if that's right. Look at verses four and five. Physical body has many members. We have one body, but we have arms, legs, hands, et cetera. The different body parts have different functions, but they all contribute to the good of the whole and they belong to each other. And the analogy there is the church. The church, though many are one body in Christ and individually members, one of another. We're united to Jesus as a whole and we're united to one another in our diversity. And what that means is that you just can't think that you're more important than someone else inside the church.

In fact, Paul and other places will tell you to consider the other person more important than yourself. And beyond that, he says, you are the body of Christ and he's more important than any of us. So there's just no room for arrogance or boasting. There is room for lots of humility. What you do affects me. What I do affects you. We're not individuals who happen to meet once a week. We are the body of Christ that's intended to function in a healthy way. And so he says, as one body with many members, you've been given gifts that differ according to the grace given to you. There's the measure of faith. You have a measure. I have a measure. They look different. These gifts differ, but they're graciously given by God. Even if you were born with them, guess who knit you in your mother's womb? God did. All of our gifts come from him and we're to use them inside the church.

We said it earlier in our confession of faith that we're not only, quote, united to Jesus our head by his spirit and by faith, having fellowship with him in his grace, sufferings, death, resurrection and glory. It's the second half. You are united to one another in love in such a way that you are to have communion in each other's gifts and graces. And you are obliged to the performance of those duties, public and private, as to conduce to their mutual good. Oblige to use your gifts for the mutual good of the people of God.

So what are those gifts and how are we to use them? He lists them in verses six through eight. You can see the list here. Prophecy service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership, mercy. In other places, there are other gifts that are listed and none of these are exhaustive in and of themselves. You kind of have to take them together as a composite throughout the New Testament. And nor are all of these gifts for all people always. They're just not.

Take the gift of prophecy. In the New Testament, if you read through the Book of Acts, you might see this character named Agabus, who prophesies to Saul or Paul what's going to happen to him if he goes to Jerusalem. And he was right. He's foretelling what was going to happen to Paul. And it seems like this happened in the New Testament era. They were for specific times and purposes.

The apostles themselves, critical in the early stages of the church, called by Jesus, sent out. And yet we don't have capital A apostles anymore. We don't really have the office of prophet anymore. And yet any of us can do ministry in an apostolic sort of way, lowercase a, or a prophetic way, truth telling. That's still the case. So that we have these different gifts, some of them in terms of office, teacher, exhorter. Paul uses those elsewhere and calls them pastors, people who do service. Servants are called deacons elsewhere. And yet everybody's called to service, right? Everybody's called to teach at times and exhort at times. We have people who lead, people who give, people who do acts of mercy. What's Paul's point?

Figure out what God made you to do and go do it, and start inside the church.

Don't go beyond what the Lord tells you to do. If you're a servant, serve faithfully. If you're a teacher and exhorter, make sure you teach and exhort truthfully. If you're a giver, be generous. If you are a leader, be zealous. If you are one who does mercy, do it with cheer.

That's how we consecrate our work to God himself. Sober thinking for the good of the body, embracing the ways we're gifted and getting busy testing and using those things for the upbuilding of Jesus's bride.

What do you do?

It's a question we throw out to each other pretty often, especially when you're just meeting somebody. What do you do? Usually what we mean is what do you do to make money? What's your job? Or what do you do to keep busy? But I would argue that Paul's laying out a different and bigger vision for what we do. We do what God has gifted us to do. Our work is given to us by him. It belongs to him. And there's no room for arrogant thinking in that. He made us whatever we are. He gifted us however he gifted us and we're to go and serve in faith. What that means is that you don't work for yourself inside the church or outside the church. We are to give all of our work wholly to him in both.

So how do you think of yourself in terms of what you do? Do you know what God has built you to do? Do you have any idea what your gifts are? That's something that should happen inside the church. We're called to do all the things listed here and in other places. Acts of mercy, leadership, giving, exhorting. And while you might have to do any of those things at some point, here's what happens. You start serving in the life of the church and you'll realize that some things, if you're right-handed, some things feel like I'm using my right hand. But man, there are these other things that like I can do it, but I feel like I'm writing with my left hand and it's getting done, but it's awkward and strange. Every Christian is called to all different types of service in the life of the church and outside and yet there are some things that feel like, oh yeah, I am able to write in cursive even. This is amazing. No offense. Well, some offense to you left-handed people I suppose is intended in this.

How do you figure that out? How do you figure out what you're gifted at? The temptation is to say, go find an online gift inventory. Those things can be useful, but they're not the be all, end all that they're intended to be. There's no place in the New Testament where it says, here's the gift test, the quiz to figure out your giftedness. Rather, it seems like you discover them by trying stuff out. You discover them by doing. It took me five minutes to realize that, oh, I'm really bad at building things. You put a hammer in my hand and something is going to get broken. Not even like writing with my left hand. It's like trying to write with my nose to give me a hammer. There are other things that I can do.

What about for you? Are you trying to figure out what God has actually built you to do inside his church? Learn the gifts of grace that you've been given. Find some lanes to serve. You're called to work and then give all of that work back to God as part of your consecrated service. I would exhort you, if you're in a place where you tend to come to worship and that's all, I am so glad that you come to worship. It is the bread and butter of everything that we do in the life of the church. It's critical.

But you have been given grace in Christ to live out a measure of faith and to build up the body. So don't just come to worship. Get busy trying to figure out how to serve these people around you. A church full of consumers, which I don't think we are, but those exist out there are harmful ultimately to the good of Jesus church. A church full of zealous people who show up and do stuff, but don't submit to God's limits or think soberly, meaning they just show up and say, this is what I'm good at, let me do it without any kind of humility and trying to figure out things, they'll just run over each other. That'll end up harming the church too.

But when we're learning in humility to serve one another in Jesus body, seeking to build each other up, submitting all of our work, energy and activity to the Lord, it is satisfying. It's enjoyable. And the church of Jesus Christ gets built up and encouraged and strengthened.

So let me encourage you to take a step forward and figuring out exactly what God is calling you to do inside the life of his church. And if you're already busy and working, how will you find refreshment in it? By realizing that through your consistent service and giving it all over to God, the Lord is pleased to use you. Not because you're adding to your salvation, but because you are responding in faith to his mercy in your life.

It's a life of consecration, wholly given to God, holding nothing back. It only makes sense if you know the mercy of God in the gospel of his son, Jesus. We give our whole lives to him and worship heart and mind, body and soul being renewed, loving what's true and good. We give him all of our work, everything that we do. You have the uniform, brothers and sisters. You've got it, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. You are a new creation if you're his. You know the mercy of God, and you know that he is going to renew the heavens and the earth and make all things right again. Don't hold back. Let's pray.

Our Father, we ask you for help in applying what your word says. If we're honest, we don't really know exactly what it means to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, wholly and acceptable. We struggle to be not conformed to the world but transformed by the renewal of our mind. And sometimes we don't even know what to do and how to build up your people. So would you help us, Lord? Would you help us to do the continual work of giving over the whole of our lives to you? Give us clarity on what you've made us to do. Give us clarity on what it means, Lord, to live a life of worship. We need your grace at work, not only in our salvation and justification, but we need your grace in our sanctification. Help us, we pray, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Portion of scripture read before sermon—1 Samuel 15:17-22