

We are living in a time where everything seems to be pulling apart. A global pandemic with a massive economic downturn. Racial tensions and protests. Police violence and burning cities. And all in a matter of a few months!

There are so many issues that could polarize Christians today. Are you supportive of the Black Lives Matter movement or not? Are you pro-protests or do you feel like you should still be social distancing? Do you get upset when you see people wearing facemasks or when people don't wear them? Do you feel like churches should be reopened immediately because large protest gatherings are happening, or do you think that people's health and safety should be a top priority?

If there has ever been a time where Christians could become argumentative with one another and divide, that time is now. The forces that are spinning us around are much like those of a centrifuge, threatening to send us hurtling outwards, away from one another.

The book of Romans was written for such a time as this, and to a church facing all kinds of issues that she could have been fractured. Racial tensions between Jews and Gentiles. How to handle people who have very liberated consciences and those who have strong consciences. What to do with a government that is actively in opposition to the Christian faith. So it is appropriate that we come to this book and these chapters in particular so that we are not polarized as a church but find ourselves pulling together. From now until the first Sunday in July, we need to have our attention drawn back to gospel principles that can guide us as God's people during this ghastly period. We need to root ourselves in the gospel so that we can have love, unity, humility, and submission that reflects our radical allegiance to Jesus Christ.

So it is good for us to root ourselves in what makes us who we are and build our lives on what matters. As Paul says, "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices..." So first, let us

### **Look to the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1a)**

This is Paul's appeal – look to the mercies of God. Be grounded in his mercies. And one little word tells us what these many mercies are: therefore. In other words, with this little word "therefore," Paul is pointing back to everything that he has written up until now. What are the mercies of God?

First, Paul laid out the problem in Romans 1-3. We all have sinned. No one has sought God. When God was in plain view, what was our response to God? We didn't care. We couldn't be bothered with his ways. We actually liked our own way of living. If he said no, we said yes. Our natural inclination was that we just didn't give one care about God and his ways.

Second, Paul presents the plan from Romans 3:21 to the end of chapter 5. God sent his own Son to reconcile us. And when did he do that? When we were getting stronger? When we were improving ourselves? When we were becoming interested in God? No –

when we were weak, when we were sinners, when we were his enemies. It was only after the fact that God sent his Spirit to flood our hearts with his love that we came to the realization that he walked through my death. He didn't just die. He was condemned. He didn't just leave heaven for me. He endured wrath and hell for me. He, the righteous one from heaven, who didn't deserve one little bit of punishment, took everything I deserved. When my soul was empty and dry, God poured his Holy Spirit into my heart and I believed by faith and felt and experienced his love. He declared me righteous and said that now he never looks at me with an angry look, but only a look of love. And he wants me to know that, though I still stumble and sin, I still need to know of his infinite love for me.

Because of God's plan to solve my problem, Paul lays out God's promises to me, in Romans 6-8. There is no longer any look from our Father with a furrowed brow; even though I still stumble and sin, our Father doesn't look at us wondering, "How can he still blow it after all that I've done for him?" No, the love of our Father is like 'an ocean without shores or bottom' (Jonathan Edwards, Sermon, "That God is the Father of Lights"). You did nothing to initiate God's forgiveness in Christ, nothing to receive God's love by his Spirit; so why do you think that things would change now? If God gave his only Son when we didn't give one rip about him, then why are you worried about his love now? Won't he keep his promises? If he saw you, loved you, chose you, is sanctifying you, don't you think he'll bring you all the way home?

So there are many mercies – he rescues his enemies, loves them deeply, and forever reassures us that you are more deeply loved than you could ever imagine. What should be our response?

### **Offer Yourself as Living Sacrifices (Rom. 12:1b)**

After eleven chapters that have told of mercy upon mercy upon mercy flowing from the heart of God, now we come to how we should live: offering our bodies as living sacrifices.

The language here is so familiar to us that we can forget how profound the imagery is. Because of God's mercies, Christians are to present an offering on the altar just like OT saints were to do. There were many types of sacrifices, but the end result was an animal was dead and offered up to God in flames. While the offerings of the OT were for different purposes, they all ended the same way: with a dead animal.

But here, Christians are called to a new life. They have been raised from death to life – dead to their old way of life, raised with Christ in a new life, just as Paul reminded them of their baptisms (Rom. 6:4). But a living sacrifice doesn't end the same – there are different applications. There are many ways we are to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. We are to be people who extend the mercy of Christ through our new lives, raised with Christ, as living sacrifices. We are to walk around spreading the mercy of Christ. And Paul gives us a list of ways we can do that:

- Verse 8: “the one who does acts of mercy, [let him do it] with cheerfulness.”
- Verse 9: “Let love be genuine.”
- Verse 13: “Contribute to the needs of the saints.”
- Verse 14: “Bless those who persecute you.”
- Verse 15b: “Weep with those who weep.”
- Verse 16b: “Associate with the lowly.”
- Verse 17: “Repay no one evil for evil.”
- Verse 19: “Never avenge yourselves.”
- Verse 20: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”

Our lives are going to extend mercy in different ways. For some of us, we will risk our reputations in the public square as lawyers, politicians, public servants. For others of us, we are going to risk our health for the sake of others as doctors and nurses. Still others are going to offer their lives as living sacrifices by being an advocate for the disadvantaged while others who are well off will offer their lives as living sacrifices by being generous to those who are in need.

And here's the beauty of the gospel: we all receive the many mercies of Christ. But what Christ asks of us is to spread that mercy in various ways according to the gifts that he has given to us: having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them (Rom. 12:6-8).

And what we will find is that some Christians will feel that they are to live more peaceably with government restrictions while others will see the need to advocate for our rights as citizens; some will be ready to risk themselves for others without a moment's thought while others will be more prone to wear a mask; some will think that Christians are being too passive while others feel Christians are being too aggressive. We will be tempted to forget that the diversity of Christian gifts and desires and responses to situations are often rooted in the various mercies of God.

So as we move forward, we come back to the thing that keeps us remembering that we are all pulling together for the sake of Christ – and that is by the gospel that has poured love into our hearts.

The present moment may feel like a centrifuge. We may feel like we are test tubes put into the centrifuge and spun around, feeling like the centrifugal force is going to push us away from one another and pull us apart. But if we remember that the gospel is the centripetal force that pulls us back together, we will find that no matter how hard we are spun and flung and tried and tested, the various expressions of God's mercy will produce much good in the world, in the church, and in us, as we remain constrained and pulled back to the center by the mercies of Jesus Christ.