



July 24, 2011
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Priority One: Living Sacrifice Romans 12:1-2

We are in the midst of a short two week series on worship called Priority One. If you were hoping today that Dr. John Lennox would be preaching, I'm excited to share with you that starting next week our theologian in residence will begin a four week series that you will not want to miss on the book of Acts.

Now, last week some of you were very concerned that not only did I take a bite of an orange, peel and all, but that I swallowed it. I have to say, it tasted pretty bitter – I had never done that before, but it did help get the point across that when we approach worship with our hearts and lives closed to God we never really get to the sweet stuff. So we need to allow ourselves to be opened up (slice orange ... no need to chop it this time) to God so that we develop a heart of worship that loves the Lord. This is where the sweet stuff is – the stuff that really matters. And our love for the Lord from the inside out is the sweet spot of our worship. Lord says through the prophet Hosea, *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings."*

I also had you think and talk with each other about what it means to be a community of worship. Today I want you to do the same thing, with one or two other people, preferably folks you didn't come with. Talk with each other about the answer to this question: what is your part in us becoming a community of worship? Try to be specific; you have two minutes. Ready? Go.

[Two minutes of small group sharing]

What is something you heard that you think would be helpful for the whole group to hear? (*Listen to various responses from the congregation.*)

Prayer of Illumination as we approach the Word.

Romans 12:1-2. ¹ *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.* ² *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Did you see how these verses help us to understand what it means to be a community of worship? If you have never read through the book of Romans, I encourage you to do so. The first 11 chapters are a wonderfully rich and profound and sometimes hard explanation of the gospel ... the good news of what God has done and will do in and through Jesus Christ. It ends with this wonderful doxology: **Romans 11:33-36** ³³*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!* ³⁴*Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?* ³⁵*Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?* ³⁶*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.* It sounds like an ending, doesn't it? But then, right here, at the beginning of chapter 12, Paul, the author, makes a very important transition. It is marked by the word 'therefore'. Whenever you see a 'therefore' in the scriptures you should ask, "What is the 'therefore' there for?" In this case, it is there to connect all of the first 11 chapters with the important application for how the church is to live. It's not an afterthought though; it is full of the natural implications for a people saved by the work of God.

Can you hear how strongly Paul feels about this part of the book? *'I urge you, brothers and sisters'*, he writes. It's as if Paul is drumming up every ounce of passion he can through the ink of a pen. But the basis of his urging is not his own authority. He doesn't say, "I urge you as an apostle and leader of the church." Instead he points to the mercy of God. *In view of God's mercy*. In view of God's *chesed*. In view of the wonderful gospel message that I have explained over the last eleven chapters. In view of how God, even while we were still rebelling against Him, initiated our salvation by sending the Son to become flesh and set things right through his life, death and resurrection. In view of God's work to make us more than conquerors in Christ – dead to sin and alive in Christ. In view of God's plan to make all things new – to end suffering and injustice and evil. In view of all of God's compassion and mercy and *chesed*, I urge you to do this one thing. And what is that one thing Paul urges them to do? Worship.

Worship is the first priority for followers of Jesus. It is the natural response to what God has done; every other part of our lives and discipleship and participation in the mission of God is to flow out of our worship. So, does he urge them to sing a song? Does he urge them to say a prayer? No. Author Richard Foster reminds us that singing, praying, and praising may lead to worship, but worship is bigger than any of those things.

So, what is worship? Look again at Romans 12:1 ***Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*** Worship is offering up your whole life to God. Sacrifice was common language to both the Jewish people and the gentiles when this letter was written. Lots of religions, back then, sacrificed animals to their gods ... sometimes they even sacrificed people. The key part of those sacrifices was death; if something didn't die then it wasn't really a sacrifice. But, here, because of Christ's death on the cross, Paul turns things

around. He says to them, "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God."

But, what does that mean? It means that Christians are to offer up their whole lives to God in a way that is holy, or set apart, and pleasing to God which means that it really is offered up in an attitude of worship and love. It means that this afternoon and Monday morning and Monday night and even Monday during the day are offered up to God in worship. It means that the way you treat your employees, and the way you talk to your spouse, and the way you treat your neighbors, and the way you work, and the way you blow off steam is offered up to the Lord as worship. I like the way the Message translates this verse, it says, "*So 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.*"

To do that your life is going to have to look different from other people who are worshipping their success or a certain lifestyle or their kids' success or their work. Paul writes, ***Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.*** The original Greek word for 'conform' speaks of a change on the outside or on the surface. For the community of Israel in the Old Testament it meant not conforming to the worship patterns of the world around them, but as the prophet Hosea reminded us last week, Israel failed at that. So, Paul urges the Christians, don't take on the worship patterns of the world around you, ***but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*** This transformation represents a real change, not just on the surface, but a metamorphosis of the whole person. And it's not something that we do to ourselves. It's something that happens to us as our lives are opened up to the work of God. As we truly worship the Lord with our lives, He transforms us. He renews our minds. One commentator sums it up this way, "Let yourselves be transformed by a whole new way of thinking, so you can discern what conforms to God's will, namely what is good and pleasing and perfect."

Sacrificing our whole life to God in worship is our absolute priority. It's not just going through the motions of our corporate worship on Sunday mornings. It's not just living the way you please during the week. It's not living part of your life or even most of your life for the Lord. It's an attitude we take about everything we do every day of our lives. We offer it all up to the Lord in gratitude and praise.

So how do these verses help us know how to become a community of worship? They teach us that worship is primary in our lives. They remind us that it's not just about what we do here together on Sunday morning but how we live our lives in our homes, in our neighborhoods, and in our workplaces. They inspire us to surrender our lives to Jesus because of all that He has done. And they disturb us; they disturb us because in them we're reminded of how prone we are to live for our own glory and the advancement of our own kingdom. So many times during the last few weeks while I've meditated on these passages about worship I've had to stop and ask the Lord to forgive me for my idolatry. It's been hard, but it has been

in these times of confession and repentance that the Lord has grown in me a deeper love for Him and a heart that longs to worship, which is what God wants in the first place.

One of the questions I've been ruminating on for the past few months while I've been thinking about worship and thinking about it coming from a heart that loves the Lord is this: **What am I teaching my children to love?** What am I teaching them with my words, with my actions, and with my lifestyle? What am I teaching them by the things I do in private or by the way I choose to use my down time? Think about that. What are you teaching your children to love? And if you don't have kids, or they're all grown, what are you teaching your community to love? What are you teaching your small group to love? What are you teaching the people who sit near you on Sunday morning to love?

One of the things I'm teaching my children to love is the University of Nebraska athletic program. Every Saturday during the football season we hang a Nebraska flag in front of the house. My kids know and sing the Nebraska fight song. They've learned cheers, and they've learned to celebrate Husker victories. I've taught them all of that.

But do you know what I really want to teach them? I really want to teach them to love the Lord and His Church. I want to teach them to live their whole lives for Jesus no matter the cost or consequence. I want to teach them to love to give praise to God in songs and prayers. So we're teaching them the songs of the church; we're helping them build relationship with the church family; we're praying together that God helps us to love Him back; we're joyfully giving ourselves to the Lord's work; we're trying to demonstrate God's love for them in our discipline and in the way we hold them accountable. But we can't do it alone. Diane and I need your help. We need to be part of a community of worship that is nurturing and encouraging and spurring our family on to love the Lord and worship Him in everything we do.

So, church, what are the things that you do with your bodies – with your lives – teaching the people around you? Are you teaching them that real men don't sing in church, or are you teaching them to love to give praise to God? Are you teaching them that God can't be trusted with your money, or are you teaching them to give freely as God has freely given to you? Are you teaching them to lust after things and people that aren't theirs to have? Are you teaching them to love acclaim or power? The things you do with your everyday life – the parts that are in public and the parts that are in private – teach something to the people around you – people in your family, people in your church, people in your neighborhood, & people in your workplace. What is your life teaching the people around you?

To be a community of worship we need to teach the people around us that the most important thing in our lives is to live each day as a sacrifice to God. We need to work together to conform our lives and our church to the will of God.

So, may we, upon considering all that God has done for us and all that God is doing in the world (stepping over to the oranges) in view of God's incredible *chesed* – may we offer your bodies (hold two halves of orange up) as living sacrifices (squeeze the oranges so that the juice falls into the glass), pouring out our lives for Jesus in a way that is holy and pleasing to God – living our everyday lives as an act of worship. May we truly be a transformed community of worship so that others will know that Jesus is Lord.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**
- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.
- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **Dig deeper**
 1. Read the passage one more time. Which words do you think are most important in Romans 12:1-2? Why?
 2. What is significant about Paul saying to offer your body up as a living sacrifice? How does that conflict with your current ideas or lifestyle?
 3. What does this passage teach us about being a community of worship? How does it inform your part of that?
 4. What is the main thing the Lord is speaking to you through this scripture and sermon? What are you going to do about it?