

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Romans 12:1-8

Verses 1,2

Therefore, I urge you brothers [and sisters], on account of God's mercies, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform to this age but be transformed by the renewal of the mind so that you can approve what is the will of God, what is good, and pleasing and perfect.

The NIV gets the translation of mercy incorrect. The noun *οικτιρῶν* is in the plural. Paul is thinking of all that he has written so far. We can list some of **the mercies of God** in chapters 1-11:

- The righteousness of God has been revealed in Christ and given as a gift for everyone who trusts in the saving work of Christ through his cross and resurrection so that they are fully justified before him (3:21-25; 4:25)
- Having been reconciled to God through Christ, Christians can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (5:2; 8:18-39)
- The power of sin in our lives has been broken by the grace of baptism, which joins us to Christ (6:4). We are no longer slaves to sin.
- Though we belong to Christ and are not to sin, we still struggle against it in our lives. God rescues us from our continuing weakness (7:25)
- Chapter 8 begins with the first **therefore**. Since we do not live under the condemnation of the law, we are now controlled by the Spirit through the renewing of our minds (8:5)
- God has made his offer of justification and glory to both Jew and Gentile and it is freely available in the preaching of the gospel to be received by faith (10:9,10)

Thus we come to the second **therefore**. Having reviewed all these **mercies of God**, the apostle explains that the renewal of the Christian mind comes through the gospel. No one can change and be pleasing to the Lord in thought, word or deed unless he or she has experienced the mercies of God. We can consider here the statement about Saul, the first king of Israel and how he was a different person when the Spirit came on him (1Sam 10:6). Those who have lived a secular life or have come from another faith testify about this transformation.

On this gospel of Christ, Paul **urges** his listeners to respond: **present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual worship**. Elsewhere, Paul makes clear that Christ has redeemed our bodies and made them his own, saving them from the destruction they were heading to (1Cor 6:20; 7:23). In 14:8 Paul makes clear that we do not belong to ourselves; Christ owns us and we are his possession. Property has an owner and the property of our lives is owned by the Lord. This assures us of our salvation but is at the same time the reason we live for him (6:13,19).

The body of each Christians is described beautifully as **a living sacrifice**, obviously because Christians are not sacrifices as dead animal carcasses are. Through Christ, the body with all its motives, thoughts, desires, attitudes and behaviours, is completely **holy and pleasing to God**. It is a redeemed, forgiven and justified body. Thus, the way we Christians live is now our **spiritual worship**. We do not engage in animal sacrifice but by the offering of ourselves in the service of the Spirit. Not bodily sacrifice as jihadists engage in but **spiritual** λογικὴν sacrifice. This last word has to do with the mind and gives us the English word 'logical'. More about the role of the mind in the next section.

Do not conform to this age is the second part of the unholy triumvirate, the devil, the world and our sinful self. Sin has these three sources and because Christians grown up in a culture they are deeply affected by the prevailing way of life. Paul urges followers of Christ to be counter-cultural. The transformation he urges on Christians comes from the word used in the transfiguration of Christ (Matt 17:2). Paul uses it again in 2Cor 3:18 to describe the gradual glorification of the Christian. The Spirit is making our image into the image and likeness of Christ.

This happens in a spiritual way by **the renewal of the mind**, which Paul speaks of in 7:25 and 8:5-7. Transformation is a complete change in the way the Christian thinks, his attitudes, desires and what he aims for in life. The new thoughts and desires come from the Spirit with the result that the Christian now knows in his mind that **God's will** is to be **approved for its good, pleasing and perfect** nature. Paul sees that the head has lordship over the body as Christ is the head of the church. Through the mind, which knows the Lord, it exercises godly discipline over the body and its desires and its actions.

Verses 3-5

According to the grace given to me, I say to all, to each one among you, do not think [of yourself] more highly than is necessary to think, but to think [in such a way] in order to have a sound judgement, according to the way that God has distributed [to each] a measure of faith. For just as in one body we have many parts and all of the parts do not have the same function, thus, we who are many are one body in Christ and each one a part of the other.

Paul diverges into the operation of the church, which is **one body in Christ**. The connection to the above verses may be the influence the prevailing culture of hierarchy, financial stratification and individual boasting may have had on the Christian community in Rome. Rome, the epicentre of the empire, was made up of people jostling for position, from senators and nobility through to merchants and freedmen and women then finally down to slaves.

How one **thinks of oneself** ought to be governed by the thinking of a new mind, one transformed by Christ rather than conformed by the culture. Thus, **a sound judgement and appraisal of oneself** should be based on **God's distribution of the measure of faith** each member of the congregation has received rather than outward status. While the Spirit endows each baptized member with faith to apprehend the grace of Christ and salvation, some have much higher faith, are bolder, more secure and confident, which is evident in prayer, mission and service.

But despite differences in social standing, education and wealth, all Roman Christians were reminded that they were like a human body, **not all having the same function, yet one body in Christ and each one a part of the other**. This revolutionary idea would go on to create a new society of equality and mutual service. Christ, who creates the church, unites it through his body. His body, once given in sacrifice, is offered to each believer in baptism as a mystical body able to unite his children in himself. In Holy Communion, the real, physical body of Christ, joins with him and with each other, those eating and drinking. Through him, each Christian has unity on an equal footing with one another and a mutual sharing and responsibility for each other.

Verses 6-8

We have different gifts according to the grace given to us. To one prophesy, according to the amount of faith, to another service in order to serve, to another teaching in order to teach, to another exhortation in order to exhort. He who [has the gift of] giving, gives with generosity, he who leads, with diligence and he who offers welfare, with gladness.

The Holy Spirit apportions gifts and what Christians do in serving the church, do so under the Spirit's grace. Since the church is holy and the body of Christ, it cannot be built using natural gifts, that is, our natural abilities absent of faith. When baptized, gifts are distributed according to our faith, that is, **according to the grace give to each Christian**. Paul is explaining the differences that can be found amongst Christians. Some may have higher responsibilities and have more prominence in the community, such as prophets, leaders and teachers but that is not their own doing but a reflection of God's sovereign choice (Matt 25:15; Eph 4:7; 1Cor 12:11). They cannot claim anything for themselves but are a reflection of God's **grace**. Gifts χαρίσματα proceed from **grace** χάρις and should be considered grace gifts, or spiritually powerful workings of the Spirit within Christians.

The various gifts are to be administered for the benefit of the church. They are also to be offered freely, with a good and willing heart.

To bring verses 3-8 into line with 12:1,2, all that the body of the Christian can do, is in service of its Lord, the Saviour Jesus Christ. The major area of service will be amongst the saints, where spiritual gifts are not a reason for boasting but for assisting in the growth of fellow Christians and the mission of the church.