

"LETTER TO OUR GENERATION"

A Series of Sermons on the letter of Paul to the Romans

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by

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"Discipleship"

Text: Romans 12:1-2

The major theme of Paul's letter to the Romans is summed up by the Apostle at the end of the 11th chapter.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsel?"

"Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

....Romans 11:33-36

And now Paul completes this summary with two dramatic sentences:

I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

.....Romans 12:1-2

In view of the grace of God toward us, the question is: "What does he want from us?" "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable, your reasonable service" This text calls upon us to have faith in God, therefore we must understand what faith is. It seems to me that there are three common mistakes we make regarding "faith."

(1) Some people think that faith is a special, technical art which only highly trained religious people can perform. They reveal this feeling by statements like, "You either have it or you don't." This could be called the "religious expert" error. Paul has helped us in Romans 12:1 to correct

this error. He calls to us to "present our bodies. . . .This is your reasonable service." The latter phrase translated "reasonable service," has been discovered in First Century Greek-Roman mystery cult religious literature; in the context of religious rites the phrase is a cliché to refer to the adequate or satisfactory religious ceremony, one that will please the particular city god or spirit. The common use of the phrase testifies to the fact that all men are basically religious and want very much to be religiously correct insofar as possible. This helps to explain the rise of religious experts who know all of the proper phrases and incantation formulas to achieve the adequate religious event. In the First Century there were oracles at many famous "holy" sites who had developed great followings because they were recognized as spiritual experts. But, the Apostle Paul rejects all of this religious expertness; Christianity is to be an amateur movement. He says to the Romans, "You present yourselves to God and that is all of the religious ceremony that you need; are you worried about doing your rite correctly; well, simply give yourself as you are and you have satisfied all liturgical requirements."

(2) There is a second mistake that a lot of people make about faith. Some of us think that faith is an absolute perfection of the human spirit that builds up eventually to absolute trust in God. As a result of this process I am able to give to God a worthy heart that perfectly obeys him. I call this the "perfect faith" error. It also is a very serious error. It permanently blocks the sincere person; it misunderstands the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul's answer to this error is contained in one fascinating Greek word: "Soma" - body. He challenges the Roman Christians to "present their bodies" to God. He might have said "soul" or "spirit" but he does not. Instead he uses the earthy word "body." He means by this we are invited to present our real selves, our doubts, our fears, problematic me, to Jesus Christ the Lord. This is what is "holy, acceptable" to God. What a tremendous breakthrough! By this truth Christian faith is set free once and for all from the "perfect faith" deception. There is no such thing as absolute faith and there never can be. "Absolutes are impossible for man" (Pascal), because man is not absolute. This means that our faith must always be a wager on our part upon the character of God. We are never absolutely certain of God nor for that matter of anything, and therefore, our faith is always complex and human. "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24) is the cry of profound Christian faith which is honest and genuine and rejects efforts to fabricate a quality or intensity of conviction that is not really there. This is what Paul means by "faith," this is why in 1st Corinthians 13 he admits that our faith will always be incomplete; this is why he uses the word "body" in Romans 12:1. We should be grateful to Paul for this clearing of the air.

(3) There is yet another error. Many people think that faith is a great heroic sacrifice. The idea is very widespread that until I have proven my courage and obedience by some act of bravery under danger, my faith is somehow not real. This is the "heroic act" error."

It would be very easy for the Apostle Paul to advocate just this form of faith in view of his own courageous life under fire, but he avoids that

very typical pitfall of heroes and for very good reason. The basic problem with a great courageous moment is that it is essentially static and from it we can only go downward. We dare not rest upon great heroic achievements of the past because we know from experience that nothing is quite as burdensome as the person who continually reminds us of his own great past achievements or the successes of his family. It is a little like the 30 year old, rather lumpy, former high school football star, who still wears his letterman sweater with the stripes and championship stars, somewhat faded by now by countless dry cleanings. Unfortunately, it is not only the sweater that is faded. We just cannot build upon singular moments of spiritual or physical success. We are grateful for them because of what we learned in that particular moment, but we are heading in the wrong direction when we institutionalize those moments, call them "faith," and expect our children to experience them just the way we did.

The real question in life is the now. What are we doing now? The Christian life is a journey, not a museum. Therefore, since we cannot rest on our laurels, Paul decides to start us off without a laurel.

"Present your real selves as a living sacrifice. . . ." ordinarily we think of sacrifices as static, as dead, whether it is a lamb or a martyr's death. Paul redefines the conventional meaning of the word "sacrifice" by attaching to it the vivid present participle "living." God does not want dead bodies, burnt offerings, static achievements. He wants you and me living day by day as his servants and friends.

Paul has portrayed a whole new way of life. He calls upon whoever may hear his words: "in view of the love of God toward us give yourselves to him. I do not call you to become a religious expert, we already have plenty of them. I call you to open yourselves to Christ as living Lord; this means the honest wager upon his trustworthiness. I realize that you do not have all of the facts but on the basis of what you now know, are willing to trust him, to bring to Christ your questions as well as your resolution. I call upon you to live this faith out day by day in ordinary life situations. I'm not calling upon you to be a hero -- though you may be surprised at certain moments of your life when others may say of you or some friend of yours that you were truly a brave man at a dangerous place -- And I promise not to bore you with my own acts of courage because we have one hero and he is Jesus Christ who was indeed the bravest of all men. But I have no shrine built even to this solitary man because his tomb is empty and he is alive as our contemporary. Therefore, become his disciple, present yourselves just the way you are, he will do the rest."