

Romans 12:1-2 home group questions

By Phil Bailey

Theme: The only reasonable response to God's mercy is whole-of-life worship, guided by renewed minds.

Aim: Be convicted of the reasonableness and of the privilege and long to offer ourselves in this way.

Summary

Paul has spent Romans 1-11 making the case that no one in the whole human race is righteous before God. Jew and Gentile alike are condemned as sinners and under God's wrath. And yet God has shown extraordinary mercy to all in Jesus Christ, sent as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, dying for God's elect while we were still sinners and enemies with God. Though we still continue to struggle with sin, we are no longer slaves. Nor does any condemnation remain for those who trust in Christ.

In light of this mercy, Paul now exhorts or strongly urges his readers to respond in the only reasonable way: to offer their whole selves, body and mind, in sacrificial surrender to God's service (v.1). They can only do this in a way that is pleasing to God, reflective of his holiness, if they resist the world, which seeks to conform them to its rebellious ways (v.2). Instead, believers must allow their minds to be transformed by knowledge of God's will, through the Word and the Spirit. This is a joint project, because we are many, but form one body (Rom 12:3-8) and one sacrifice (12.1). So we need each other to teach, encourage, instruct, serve and support each other in growth in godliness (e.g. Rom 15:14 – though this is always on the basis of the Apostle's teaching, hence 15.15 and Paul writing to remind them of various things!). In order to support and instruct one another in a really effective way, we also need to open up our lives and our hearts to each other, going deep in relationship. Serving God in complete surrender like this is a privilege, because we don't have to earn our salvation by our obedience – we are as loved in Christ as we could possibly be. And yet it is also a privilege because we, uniquely of all peoples (cf Rom 14:23), can please God. Our Heavenly Father actually takes pleasure in our faltering obedience and slow progress (implied in 12:1-2)!

Sermon points:

- 1) True worship is body and soul, 24/7 (but we will only respond like this in so far as we are overwhelmed by God's mercy)
- 2) True worship is collective (many bodies, but one sacrifice)
- 3) True worship is Word and Spirit led (only through the Word, by the Spirit can we discern God's will correctly)
- 4) True worship is a holy privilege (we don't have to earn God's love, yet he takes pleasure in our growing obedience)

Notes on the text:

- In the 12:1, the sacrifice isn't just living because we remain alive, unlike the lambs, bulls and goats which were slaughtered at the tabernacle or temple. Rather, in line with Romans 6:11-13 and 8:10-11, it is living because we are no longer dead in sin, but alive in the Spirit. So we are able to choose righteousness and put sin to death (though Romans 7:7-25 and personal experience suggest to me that this will still be a struggle this side of heaven).
- At the end of 12:1, the NIV uses the gloss 'true and proper worship'. This is fair enough, but it obscures something of Paul's meaning. The Greek reads 'this is your reasonable/rational/thoughtful service' ('spiritual', per ESV, is very unlikely because there is a different and much more obvious Greek word Paul could have chosen if he meant this and he uses the normal word for 'spiritual' regularly in Romans!). Firstly, the sacrifice Paul exhorts us to is reasonable in the sense that it is the only right, fitting and logical response to God's mercy.

What else can we do when our salvation comes 100% from God and 0% from us?! Secondly, the word 'service' is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (which Paul and his readers were familiar with) for the work of the Levitical priests at the tabernacle or temple, as they brought sacrifices and offerings to God, tended the lamps, taught the people, etc. This service is often described as worship and it is rightly translated as that here. But it's helpful for us to see that the particular kind of worship that we offer to God now has the same exalted status as the service the Levites used to offer. We, like them, are holy and set apart for God. We also get to approach God in a way that only a few in Israel were allowed to. Indeed, only one person (the High Priest) was allowed right into the most holy part of the temple, once a year. In a sense, we are allowed into God's very presence the whole time – though that is more the point of Hebrews 4 than Romans 12!

Questions:

1) What strikes you most about the nature of true worship as Paul presents it Rom 12:1-2?

2) Why is God's mercy in Jesus Christ the only proper and sufficient motive for whole-of-life sacrifice?

What helps you to appreciate God's mercy afresh?

How can others in your home group help with that?

(These follow on questions might be better discussed in pairs or threes first)

4) Where do you most feel the need to grow in your understanding of God's will, so you can live in a way that is more pleasing to him?

How can others in your home group help with that?

N.B. Paul is talking about God's moral will for all Christians more than guidance for individual decisions like which job to take or which house to rent/buy. Obviously his moral will shapes and influences these decisions though! E.g. we wouldn't take a job as a prostitute, a fraudster or a pro-abortion campaigner! Similarly Biblical wisdom, e.g. in Proverbs, might dictate that it's unwise for you to buy a house that's realistically beyond your means.

5) We saw that true worship is a collective project: many bodies, but one sacrifice. And each of us is needed to make that sacrifice as pleasing to God as it can be. To help each other appreciate your value to the body of Christ, spend some time as a home group encouraging one another with the gifts you see in each other or ways in which they've blessed you. It could be as simple as being there as a shoulder to cry on once or buying you a celebratory pint (cf. Rom 12:15)!

6) What, if anything in the sermon or the passage, encouraged you about the privilege of surrendering to this God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?