

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Where Your Life Pivots”

Romans 12: 1-8

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The Apostle Paul always delivers up a 1-2 punch when he writes. First, he lays it on thick theologically... then he gives them something practical. In every letter there are always a few pages of navel gazing... deep, heady stuff... and then he writes about the way that they ought to be living.

It's a 1-2 punch of belief and obedience...

Thinking and living...

There is their doctrine and the ethics of their daily lives.

Romans is like that. For 11 chapters Paul goes on... and on... and on... to these Roman Christians about what makes someone right with God. **“It isn't at all about being good enough...”** that's what he hammers.

“Quit thinking there is some righteousness “do list”... where you can just check off enough items (“didn't do this, did do that, and that”) then God grants you some kind of salvation.”

That's really the message. **“We are justified by faith... not by works... It's grace not a grade book.”** Read the first eleven chapters and that's the thinking Paul is trying to hammer home (and he does hammer it) to the Romans. **“Thanks be to God, there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus.”** It resounds. **“There is now no condemnation.”**

So... everyone who reads it and hears it and gets it breathes a sigh of relief. That sound you hear is the Church's exhale... **“Whew....”**

Then Paul uses his favorite pivot word... **“Therefore.”** It's time for the second punch of this Pauline volley... and for the rest of the epistle (five chapters) he writes to them about their lives.

What happens 9 to 5...

How they function behind closed doors...

How they do relationship... and church... and government.

How they deal with difficult people and immature people and divisive people. He's writing about stuff you faced this last week.

What was it for you? Anyone have to deal with someone who had a very different opinion on something than you had? Anyone here find themselves in disagreement with someone who is your authority in some way?

Were you with someone who was grieving? Or celebrating?

Were you tempted to cause pain for someone who caused you pain?
Did you pay your taxes willingly?

All that and more, is touched on in Romans... on the other side of **“therefore.”** It’s the “how-to” stuff. The “how to live” stuff always comes after the “who you are” stuff. The doing is always in response to the being... at least if you believe Paul... and if you follow Jesus. The doctrines we believed are believed so that we might be a certain way.

We get a vision of the world and life and ourselves and most of all of God... and then when we wake up on Monday morning, the idea is that our day is different... and maybe the world’s day.

Jesus reveals a larger reality... as Paul says earlier in Romans, **“In the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.” (1:17)**

This is the big covenantal shift in scripture... The people of faith move from believing that they must behave a certain way in order to get something from God... to behaving a certain way because they’ve gotten something from God.

The gospel is an invitation to shift... to shift from working to change the heart of God... to responding to the heart of God that is only filled with grace and love for you.

Do you believe that? Really? I know it’s a part of your doctrine, but would I see you live it if I followed you around one day?

As much as we say we believe the Bible, I’m sorry to say that a good bit of the story of the Christian faith has been an inability to make that shift. We put good works... the law... rules... on the wrong side of “therefore.” If we get it right... if we do it right... if we finally, for goodness sake, get our stuff together... God will be pleased.

The gospel is a flip-flop of that...

It’s radical love and grace.

God is already pleased with you.

You are the Apple of God’s Eye.

You are... it’s a matter of your being.

And Paul just simply says... **“THEREFORE... in view of God’s amazing mercy... you ought to live a certain way.”** It just makes sense.

“Offer your bodies (first of all) as living sacrifices holy and pleasing do God.” Paul moves from the most profound, heady theology to the basic stuff. Your body.

In a day and in a religious age where either the body was seen as inconsequential... something to someday escape... or where the sensual experience was the end all... this was a very different word.

Greek philosophy said the body was basically a burden for the spirit to bear. You had that thinking in the culture... but you also had pagan religions that seem to think ecstasy was ultimate... sexual experience was a part of their worship.

Paul invites us to ... understand that our bodies are holy and encourages us to present them to God in gratitude.” That’s a long way from **“don’t smoke, drink, or chew... cause God’ll be upset with you if you do.”** It’s not that thinking at all.

We do not come trembling fearfully to God’s altar offering up our pious disciplines to placate God... We don’t cower into the Divine presence ready for the white glove test. We come gratefully... joyfully, always.

And Paul invites us to see via God’s mercy, the holiness of our lives... everything...

the very basic stuff...

our bodies.

“This is,” he writes, **“Our spiritual act of worship.”** Everything is spiritual. Taking care of yourself is spiritual. Being good to your body... listening to it... loving it. Don’t think you can’t partition your life and say **“this is spiritual and that is material.”**

Everything is spiritual... so the prophesy of Zachariah has been fulfilled, **“When that day comes, the very bells on the horses will be inscribed with the words, ‘sacred to Yahweh,’ and the cooking pots of the house will be as holy as the sprinkling bowls before the altar.”**

Really, this is very good news. It’s all spiritual... it’s all a manifestation of God. That hour you spend at the gym is as spiritual as any hour in prayer. The enjoyment of eating garlic chicken at Cathay House is a spiritual act. Playing golf is definitely spiritual... doesn’t always sound that way, I know, but it is. Making love is spiritual. Breathing... sleeping... laughing and crying.

“Lift all of this up as an offering to God.” That’s what Paul suggests God wants.

God doesn’t ask for magnificent liturgies and prayers from you... great rituals.

Or lots of spiritual chit-chat...

Or a full calendar of church busyness.

Just live everyday and every little moment with the awareness that God has graced you... loves you... and that your life is an altar.

It begins there. With the rest you need... the care a discipline of your physical being. The pleasure you were made to know. That’s the first and basic thing on the other side of therefore.

Then comes that familiar passage we learned in VBS. **“Do not conform to the pattern of the world but be transformed by mind renewal.”** The word

there for pattern is the word where we get our word “schemata.” It’s all about an outward structure... something that is constructed by what is external.

Construed...

And everyone of us sitting here this morning has been shaped externally.

By a family... by significant others.

By a society... by a culture... by a time.

By expectation, predication, and prophecy.

You are in many ways (at one level) a social construct... a fabrication, I’m sorry to say.

Why do you like to eat steak...

or wear suits?

Why do you cut your hair like Jennifer Anston? Why?

Buy the home you have?

Why do you think the way you think politically? Why do you believe what you believe and value what you value? Why do you aspire to the things you aspire to? Who told you a picket fence would be nice?

It’s not that it’s bad, necessarily... some of it, maybe most of it can be good. We need it for survival. Someone told you to eat your green beans... go to church... work hard... get along... and so on. It’s not bad per se. It’s just not chosen... it’s constructed... externally. Americans think differently than Brazilians and Middle Easterners... right. Southern Baptists think differently than... well... most everyone, I guess.

We just tend to get shaped that’s all. Why did the folks at Enron and Worldcom do the things they did? Were they less moral than I am? Maybe not... maybe they were just living in a culture and they were being shaped by it... blindly shaped by it. There is a pattern to the world.

How could the holocaust happen in the modern era?

People conform.

They are constructed.

You’ve seen good and smart people do bad and stupid things, haven’t you? You’ve seen church people behave in a way that would make Jesus blush, haven’t you? As into power and control and win/lose as is the world... there is a pattern and we’ve been patterned after it.

We conform... you conform. It’s so easy. Conforming takes no discipline... not mind. Involves you in no redemptive suffering. No need to awaken... no need to repent.

You’re simply poured into the mold of a world and a worldview and way of being and seeing. You adopt a pattern... and as Paul begins to write to people about how to live on the other side of therefore, he says, don’t do that.

Don't be externally conformed... be internally, eternally transformed. The word there is the word from which we get our word "morphe"... as in the Mighty Morphing Power Rangers, for those of you who were raising young ones several years back.

To morphe is to change... to become something different... a new creation. And it's an inside-out thing. We are transformed, Paul says, **"By the renewing of the mind."** And most people read that and they think, **"Great... more school! Fan-dad-gum-tastic... I've got to start reading more... Join some study groups."**

The word there for mind, is nous... and in the spiritual tradition, the mind, the nous, is not your gray matter... It's not the brain, rationality.

It is the center. It's consciousness (Lynn Bauman). As important as good thinking is... Paul isn't saying, **"Study hard and you'll be changed."** You should probably study about your faith but don't expect that to change you.

The word nous is a word that describes a place inside you. Think of it as a part of your spiritual body. You might call it "an appeture" (Lynn Bauman). Like the appeture of a camera... that lets in the light. It's like a window to what is real. Only our windows are all gunked up... by all sorts of things. We can't see what's real. The culture is in the way... life is... we are. We live unconsciously.

Paul's admonition is to make this central part of the self new... renew it... cleanse it... keep it in shape. Raise your consciousness. If you don't, you have no other option but to let the world shape you.

Let grace shape you deep down and you won't have to go looking out there... to the worlds pattern. Nothing out there can make you whole. Renew the center and be transformed from within.

Think of it... Paul is holding out a hope that a year from now you can be different... That bitterness in your heart can be healed. There's hope... there's a possibility by grace that you don't have to be so fearful a year from now... that I don't have to be so obsessive. That we all could be more loving and more free and more awake.

All because grace is the ultimate reality... this is where your life pivots.

Things change because of grace. It's not just a doctrine... it's a change agent.

Paul always begins with grace. **"By the grace given me, I say to you... see yourself honestly."** It's not so hard to do, once we're opening up to grace. It's impossible without it.

Who'd want to look in the mirror... without grace?

Who'd want to face what's real about themselves...
a part from a mirror that is complete mercy.

But once you've seen in the mirror God holds before you... once you've said yes to God's love, you can do that. You don't have to live in defense of yourself and from yourself. You can be honest about who you are... your frailties and weaknesses... your sins. There's no need to be something you aren't... and trying means we missed the message in the first eleven chapters of Romans.

Paul just keeps on with this "therefore talk." He talks about using your gifts and doing that with a sense of joy and gratitude... they're all given by grace, he says. It always starts with that awareness.

See... if I really know that... If I know that I'm loved I can say "therefore" and I can accept who I am and how I've been gifted and I can offer that... whatever it is... I can offer it with joy. I don't have to feel inferior because I'm not offering what someone else is offering.

Who was it that said, **"When I get to heaven, God's not going to ask me why I wasn't more like Moses... God's going to ask me why I wasn't more like me."**

It's time just to be more like you. God's great mercy is so great... Therefore, offer yourself as a living sacrifice. Quit listening so much to the world... believe the gospel instead. God has called your name and we only need from you what God has graced you to give.

Isn't that good news? Amen.

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