

HEAD TO TOE WORSHIP

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We are continuing our study on worship this morning. Worship is a core value here at New Day. Our vision is to build a worshipping community. In worship we express what we love and know about God. In worship we reconnect with the big picture. In worship we show the world around us that we believe in something real and more substantial that is in contrast with the shallowness that most of us feel in everyday life. Worship has the power to be transformational.

It is also the one job of the church that we'll take with us into eternity. Have you ever thought about that? Everything else we do – our efforts to reach out, to help people in need, to encourage people to grow – that will all come to an end. We won't need those things any more. But we'll keep worshipping God forever and ever.

This morning I'd like to center our discussion around a single verse, which is a little unusual. Normally we'll cover more ground, but it seemed fitting to me today to narrow our scope.

A few months ago, Time magazine ran a feature on new innovations, and they told the story of this man, who has invented something they call "smart dust." It is these little particles currently the size of a grain of rice that contain all kinds of information in a single speck.

When I look at our text for today, Romans 12:1, I think of smart dust. It's a very small verse, but it is loaded with information. In just a few short words, Paul packed huge amounts of meaning.

To really see dust properly, you have to look at it differently. Last week we looked at big stories, pulling out broad, general observations. This morning we're going to put the verse under a microscope, breaking it down into even smaller packages that we can analyze to get at the full measure of what's inside.

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.

Last week, we looked at the spiritual side of worship. What happens in the spiritual world when we express our love and knowledge of God? We saw that worship can be an important defensive and offensive weapon in the battle that is raging in the invisible realms. We looked at how what we do in worship has cosmic significance.

Today, we're going the other way. We're looking at a much more down to earth side to worship. This is worship in the physical world. Paul says that offering our physical bodies to God is an act of worship. There's a connection between our bodies and God. What is it? What does it look like? What does it mean to offer our bodies as living sacrifices?

It doesn't take Paul very many words to say some profound things. So let's break it down and examine it more closely. Here is the first phrase one more time:

Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy...

Paul gives us our beginning point. He says that in worship,

We put a picture on the fridge.

How many people here have ever been on a diet? One of the most common tricks people use to stay motivated is to put a picture of a skinny person on the refrigerator, so that every time they go to open the door, they're reminded of why they don't want to grab that piece of leftover chocolate cake and glass of whole milk.

Paul tells us that God's mercy is what we need to have in mind when we come to worship. We need to keep that picture in front of us as a motivator for what we do in worship. We have that in view. We do what we do in light of what he has done.

I had a professor in college who used to say that when you see a "Therefore" you need to know what the therefore is there for. Corny, but true. Paul has just spent the first eleven chapters of his letter to the Romans explaining just how incredible God's mercy really is. Sometimes it's referred to as the Roman Road, because it lays out such a clear path for understanding what God has done for us.

Here's a brief review:

Paul starts off with the bad news in Romans 3:23:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Out of all the billions of people who have walked this planet, not a one of us has been able to stack up to God. We all fail at some point. Not only that, we intentionally make choices against what God would want us to do. We're wired that way. It's that old word sin.

The problem with that is what Paul points out next in Romans 6:23:

The wages of sin is death...

There are consequences to being the way we are. We forfeit the most precious thing we have, which is our life. It's not a choice – it is the ultimate conclusion that has to be reached when you go against the source of all life. And just like everybody on the planet has fallen short of God's glory, everybody has paid the price of dying a physical and spiritual death.

That's where Paul introduces God's mercy. The second half of that verse says

The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Knowing it wasn't working for us, knowing we couldn't fix the situation on our own, God took it on himself. He had no reason to do it other than loving us and having mercy on us. He sent his son Jesus, who wouldn't have the sin problem but who would suffer the consequence of our sin in our place. He volunteered to be a substitute. And in his mercy he offered us his life in place of our death.

Paul moves on to say in Romans 10:9

...if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

In other words, the only requirement for experiencing God's mercy is to accept it as mercy. It couldn't get any more compassionate than that. And that is what brings us to chapter 12. It is as we look at that mercy that God has offered that we offer ourselves to him in worship.

I think that is important on a few levels. First, it is obvious that the more aware we are of that mercy, the more thankful we will be. When I take the time to think about how deep my imperfections are, when I remember just how rebellious my attitude can be and how self-centered I am at my core, it is amazing that God wipes all that away and still accepts me. I am drawn to worship in view of God's mercy.

I think Paul also wanted to emphasize that the mercy is in place BEFORE the worship. We don't try to worship God to obtain his mercy. It reminds me of the story of the prophets of Baal. When the Israelites started worshipping an idol named Baal, and Elijah, God's prophet, decided to have a showdown. So he called all the people together.

1 Kings 18:25-29

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

God is not like Baal. Our approach to him is not one where we have to demonstrate our intensity to get his attention. You'll hear me talk about this a million times, because we're so quick to get it turned around in our heads. **God doesn't love us because we worship him – we worship him because he loved us first.** Paul says it is in view of God's mercy that we do what we do.

One last thing that bears mentioning about keeping the picture of God's mercy on the fridge is that we'll be more inclined to extend that same mercy to others. Just as Christ was the sacrifice for us, we can be living sacrifices for others, giving up our own petty agendas. What is sometimes hard for our pride to swallow comes much easier when done in light of what God has done for us. Karin and I went to see *The Passion* yesterday afternoon and I can't think of God's mercy now without those images in my head. The price Christ paid to show love to the world hits hard when it is shown that graphically. We got home and felt like the small complaints we have seem pretty trivial in comparison. In worship we keep that picture on the fridge.

This takes us right into that next phrase in the verse:

Offer your bodies as living sacrifices...

Paul shows us that in worship,

We have true job security.

One of the first years in my job at Brandner Communications, we hit a real low in our workload. There was not enough to do. We literally spent one afternoon playing board games at work because it was so slow. I could have easily been let go at that time.

Now, there's so much work to do, I can't see straight most days. We just had someone quit recently, and things are really piling up. We won't be running out of work for quite some time.

That's what Paul says is true about our worship. We've got plenty to do.

In the Old Testament, the Jews would sacrifice animals to God, picturing in a way what Jesus would do on the cross. But the animals they offered were dead. Once the sacrifice was over, it was over. People went back to their usual life until it was time for the next one.

Paul says we are to be living sacrifices. To again quote a corny cliché, the trouble with living sacrifices is that they keep crawling off the altar. It takes ongoing work to be offering ourselves as a living sacrifice to God. It isn't just a do it once and forget it kind of thing – it is our new reality of constantly going back to God and putting all we are before him. **Offering ourselves is a constant thing.**

What does it mean to offer our bodies to God? We can think of it on two different levels.

1. Including our bodies in worship.
2. Turning our lives into worship.

On the surface, we can think about our physical bodies in a worship setting like this. We should be fully engaged in the process with not just our minds, but our bodies as well. We are physical beings, so it is only natural that worshipping God would involve more than our brains.

For example, Scripture talks about various ways our bodies can participate in worship:

Psalm 47:1

*Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.*

Putting your hands together is a legitimate way to express joy to God. When we do that we're demonstrating our confidence in him. The King James translates it "shout unto God with a voice of triumph." Clapping conveys joy and victory.

We're also instructed to raise our hands.

Psalm 28:2

*Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,
as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.*

That one is a little more foreign to us culturally. We're used to clapping, but maybe it feels funny to raise our hands in worship. Why do that? Think of it as symbolizing reaching out to God. It is both a way to say we're offering up to him what we have, and a way of inviting him to place his answers to our prayers in our hands. It's a receptive kind of stance to welcome him. Think of small children reaching for their parents, needing to be picked up. We can also raise our hands as a way to testify to our agreement with what is being said in worship. It says, "This is true. This is what I want for myself."

Our legs and feet also get involved. We looked last week at how the whole Israelite community came and stood before the Lord. Standing can be a way of showing respect and that we are truly paying attention.

Sometimes we go the other direction though, too.

Psalm 95:6

*Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;*

I was checking references for a video company at work, and saw a brief clip they had filmed of this woman who works at a wolf preserve. The wolves all consider her the Alpha Wolf – the leader of their pack. Sometimes they will jump up and put their front paws on her shoulders. And even though they are bigger than her and would naturally stand taller than her on their hind feet, they will never let their heads get higher than hers, and they will never look her in the eye. It is a matter of respect.

Someone once said that if we were designing our worship spaces properly, we would leave more room between the rows so people could bow down and kneel before God, because that is such an important physical posture in worship. She's not here this morning, but last week, Roxy got down on her knees in the middle of worship. If that's too daring of a move for you, I would encourage you in your prayers at home to occasionally get up out of your chair and kneel on the floor before God. It is a physical act that alters your perspective.

Those are just a few examples. We can't disengage from worship physically. We don't enter some trance-like state where we are disembodied. God made us physical people to worship in a physical way.

But I don't think that is what Paul's primary focus is here when he talks about offering our bodies to God. I think instead he's referring to our capacity to act.

Pretty much, we can't accomplish anything in life without somehow involving our bodies. Even if we are idea people, we have to write or talk about those ideas in order for them to become any kind of reality.

It's like when you're a teenager and you get your first car. Mine was a 1966 VW Bug. It was my freedom. I no longer needed my mom's car to get around. I could go where I wanted when I wanted.

My older sister never had her own car. So the year she lived at home while going to community college, I had to let her drive my car. There were many times I didn't want to give up the keys.

Sacrificing our bodies to God is really handing him the keys. We're saying however he wants to use the vehicle he's given us, he can. We give up our right to do what we want when we want.

That's a much deeper and more personal choice than just offering an animal or other sacrifice. It would feel so much better to just be able to sing and pray to God and read our Bibles without it impacting the rest of our day. But that's not what God is looking for.

1 Samuel 15:22

Do you think all GOD wants are sacrifices -- empty rituals just for show? He wants you to listen to him! Plain listening is the thing, not staging a lavish religious production.

In his book Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis wrote this:

The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day...

We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through.

We offer all we have and all that we are to God in worship, which is far more radical than an hour or two spent at church.

In the next phrase of that verse, Paul says that when we do that, it is

holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual act of worship.

Our worship can actually be pleasant to God now. That is because in worship,

We are seen through Christ-colored glasses.

When Isaac was five, he had to have eye surgery to correct a condition known as amblyopia, where his eyes would cross to focus. Prior to the surgery, we did 9 months of therapy with him, that Isaac called eye school.

For one of the exercises in eye school, Isaac had to wear a pair of glasses that had one green lens and one red lens. He would then work with red and green objects to strengthen each eye. The eye with the green lens couldn't see the green objects, and the eye with the red lens couldn't see the red objects. They would completely disappear so the other eye would have to do the focusing.

Let's say we have all our bad stuff in view. When God looks at us now, he's looking through the lens of what Christ did for us, and it completely cancels out our sin and everything we have done to offend God, everything that would prevent us from enjoying a relationship with him.

Now when we worship, it can actually please him and be a pure joy. We are holy in his eyes.

Even though we know that in our hearts, sometimes we can still be living with the fear that God has taken those glasses off, and that he's angry with us again. We mess up, slip into an old habit and begin to wonder if God really still loves us.

But we're on solid ground when we have Christ on our side.

Romans 8:37-39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Isn't that fantastic? We don't have to worry.

I've been in churches where there was a lot of fear about music styles used in worship. I've been to other churches where if you weren't really dramatic and big in your worship style, they looked at you kind of strange. God is not getting hung up on those details. What Christ did is enough for him. God is looking at us through Christ-colored lenses that make what we do in worship acceptable. It's not about us anymore.

That should free us up to be creative in the way we approach worship, and as we close this morning, I'd like you to think creatively about your response. Since this was a physically oriented message, I'd like to keep things as concrete and tangible as possible.

First, how can I keep God's mercy top of mind? A Scripture verse taped to the mirror? A sticky note on my computer? What can I give myself to remind me of what he has done for me?

Second, are my hands and feet engaged in worship? What posture can I work on adding into my times of worship to expand and stretch a little? Maybe it will be hitting my knees tonight when I pray. They called the Apostle James "Camel Knees" he had such callouses on them from praying. Maybe I can try raising my hands in singing or clapping once in a while. It will feel forced and mechanical at first, but it might force me to think about worship in a different way and to be more intentional in my choices.

And finally, what car keys can I hand over this week? What area of my life has it been difficult for me to hand over to God? Is it my job? Has that been a separate part of me that has nothing to do with God? Is it my family? My relationship with my spouse? Thinking about my future?

Great things can happen as we hand our life over to God. When the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan into the promised land, Joshua called everyone together.

Joshua 3:5

Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."

The next day God parted the Jordan and the people walked into the promised land without even getting wet. It was a great start to their future.

As we dedicate ourselves to God, as we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, God is going to do amazing things among us. Let's not be people who hold back. Let's give ourselves to God head to toe. As we step out in faith, we'll see him part the waters in front of us so we can walk across the river and claim the land God has for us.