

When Love Gets Difficult
Part Three: Living Sacrifice
Romans 12.1-2

September 14, 2025

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his wonderful and challenging book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, says:

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. 89

It is one of the greatest paradoxes of the Christian faith.

Jesus says, "Come and live."

But he also says, "Come and die."

For the past two Sundays we've been focusing on the incredible grace and mercy God has shown to us as human beings. Despite our mutinous hearts, even while we were actively defying God's holy standard and pushing him out of our lives, God conspired at the greatest possible cost to himself to bring us home to himself and to fold us into his loving embrace.

The Father sent the Son, who came to humanity and stretched out his arms for us on the cross, and said to us, "Come and live."

John 10:10: "I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full."

So come and live!

But that same Jesus, anticipating his coming death on the cross, turned to his followers, stretched out his arms, and said, "Come and die."

Matthew 16.24-25: "If you want to be my disciple you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."

So come and die!

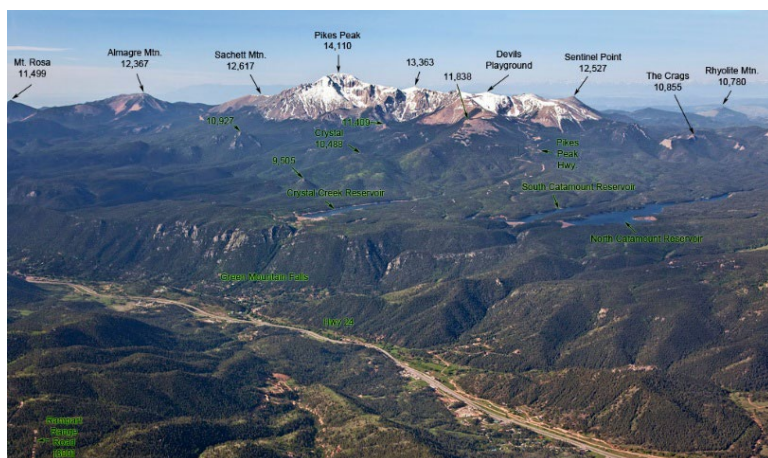
What do you do with those absolutely opposite invitations?

That leads straight into the passage of scripture we are looking at this morning: Paul's letter to the church in Rome, chapter 12, the first 2 verses. Paul writes:

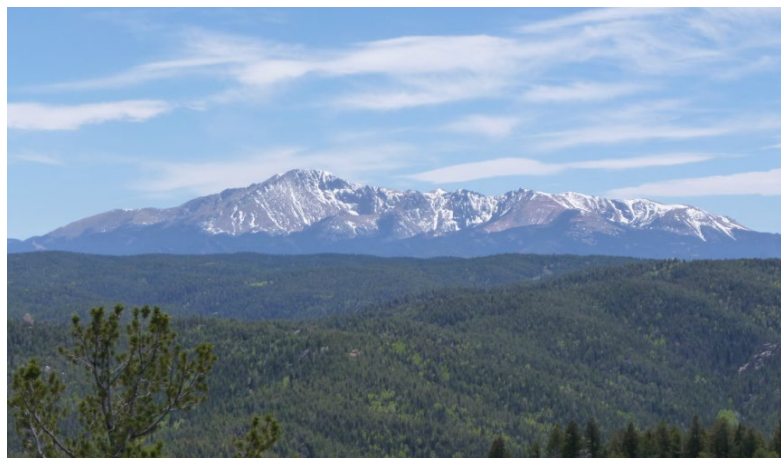
Romans 12.1-2

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

As some of you know, Sharon and I lived in Colorado Springs for nine years before we moved here. Just to the west of Colorado Springs the Rocky Mountains begin. First Rampart Range, with all of its peaks and promontories, and then behind that, Pikes Peak, almost three miles high.



When you are right up against Rampart Range, you see lots of individual peaks - Cheyenne Mountain, Mt Rosa, Almagre, Mount Cutler, Blodgett Peak, Sentinel Point, Mount Hermon – and Pikes Peak kind of gets lost in among them all.



But the farther away you are, the more the really key features of the landscape emerge, till you get to a point where you really only see two things: Rampart Range, which fades into a level plateau, and Pike's Peak, which towers over the whole of it.

That's what we're going to try to do today.

We'll divide this passage up into its four main parts, and then, with each one, we'll back up and back up until we get to the essence of what it says.

* * *

The first part is the opening of Romans 12.1. Paul says

Romans 12.1

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

He's saying: to make sense of what I'm about to say to you next, you really have to have this in mind what I've already told you about *the mercies of God*.

Mercy, you remember, refers to God's heart of compassion that moves him to step toward us in our need. And the primary places Paul speaks of the mercies of God are in chapters 5 and 8.

So two Sundays ago we went back to Romans chapter 5, where Paul lays out for us how we were alienated from God. But through his sacrifice for us, Jesus reconciled us. He brought us back into the love of the Father.

The hallmark verse is Romans 5.8

God showed his great love for us by *sending Christ to die for us* while we were still sinners.

Then last Sunday we looked at Romans 8, where Paul tells us that when we put our confidence in him and in what his death accomplished for us, as a sacrifice in our place, then we can be certain that nothing can take us out of the love of the Father.

A hallmark verse in that passage is Romans 8.31-32:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all ...

So Paul says in Romans 12.1:

Therefore, in view of the fact that

Jesus offered his life as an offering for you.

Pausing there . . . it's one thing to read that someone sacrificed his life or her life for someone else. But in the New Testament, when we read on to discover for whom Jesus, we are startled to discover that it was us!

Have you come to see that that sacrifice was in your place and on your behalf? The Christian faith begins with receiving the gift of that sacrificial exchange. Have you ever received that gift?

* * *

Paul goes on. In the light of that merciful self-sacrifice, Paul says, I now urge upon you an equally radical and an equally sacrificial response.

Romans 12.1

I urge you, brothers and sisters . . . to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

To understand this passage, it is important that we understand the context that Paul has in mind as the backdrop.

You remember last Sunday in 8.31-35 Paul used his imagination to bring us into a courtroom.

Now in 12.1 he brings us into a courtyard, specifically, the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple was the center of Old Testament worship, and the courtyard was the place where God's people presented offerings and sacrifices to God as an act of worship.

So picture an altar, and next to it the sheep or goat or bull or dove that is the sacrificial offering.

The animal is offered by the worshiper, put to death by a priest, its body is laid on the altar, and then it is consumed by the altar fires.

And when that offering is performed in the way that God stipulates, in the Jewish scriptures it is called a "holy" offering, and is said to have an aroma that is "pleasing to God."

But now, on this side of the once-and-for-all sacrificial death of Jesus, in the period that God calls the New Covenant, the temple, the priesthood, the altar, and the sacrifice have all been abolished.

In one sense. But in another sense, they haven't. The Old Testament sacrificial system becomes an archetype for New Testament faith.

There is still a temple, but that temple is the heart of every follower of Jesus, whom God inhabits by his Spirit.

And there is still a priest, but it isn't a human priest - it is Jesus, the Great High Priest, who offered his own life as his sacrifice once and for all, to satisfy the requirements of the law.

And there are still followers making offerings, but now the offering we make is not a *substitute* for ourselves, but is the offering *of ourselves*.

Romans 12.1

I urge you, brothers and sisters . . . to offer *your* bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God —this is your true and proper worship.

In response to the mercies of God, in response to Jesus offering his life as an offering for us, we are called to offer our lives as an offering back to him.

This is your true and proper worship.

That is, it is appropriate, fitting, the sort of response from us that makes sense because of what God did for us.

Not a response of *obligation*: you did this for me, so I guess I'm obligated to pay you back. Instead, it is a response of gratitude. You did this for me; how could I help but respond in a reciprocal way, by loving you in the same sort of way. You offered your life for me. I offer my life for you. That's fitting. Rightly understood, the entire Christian life is a response of gratitude.

The word here for worship is an interesting one. It is a technical term that referred originally to performing the Old Testament sacrificial duties in the right way, fulfilling the requirements that God laid out for us. Do you want to know how to offer a sacrifice today, in the New Covenant era?

I urge you to offer as an offering, to sacrifice as a sacrifice, you. That is the very thing that satisfies God's expectations and pleases him most.

So what does it mean to offer our *bodies* as a living sacrifice to God?

When Paul says to offer our "bodies," he is really saying to offer ourselves, our lives. Our allegiances get formed in our minds and they get expressed through out bodies.

A living offering is not of a *body given* for God but of a *life lived* for God.

Paul isn't introducing a new idea here. Earlier in Romans, in chapter six, right after the section where he describes how Jesus gave his life for us while we were still sinners in chapter 5, Paul wrote this in verse 13:

Romans 6.13 (NLT)

Offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.
Use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God.

So here is Paul's second main idea.

***Jesus offered his life as an offering for you.
Offer your life as an offering back to him.***

So pausing here . . . it turns out that when Paul talks about dying, he is really talking about living, and the key question he puts before us is this: who are you living for?

It may be the single most challenging question we can face as human beings.
Who are you living your life for?

If I handed you a piece of paper this morning that said, "I live for _____," and you were to take a pen and write in an answer, what would that answer be?

Who do I live for? I live for _____.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

II Corinthians 5.15

Jesus died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So, which will it be?

Some of you have read the beautiful allegorical story called *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, by Hannah Hurnard. It tells the story of a crippled and fearful deer that is learning how to scale the heights and live in freedom, a metaphor for entering into the fullness of the life God has for us.

At one point on her journey she comes to a clearing and finds an altar. She realizes that she can't go any further unless she offers herself on it. "This is the place," she says. "This is where I am to make my offering."

Then she goes up to the altar and kneels and asks God to help her make the offering he asks of her.

As she presents her life to God, the narrator writes:

In all the world only one thing really mattered, to do the will of the One she followed and loved, no matter what it involved or cost. (102)

* * *

Which leads beautifully into the next verse in Romans 12, and seems to follow exactly the thread that Paul is unfolding here.

Offering ourselves as living sacrifices implies a dying of some aspects of who we are, and a coming to life of other aspects of who we are. There's a putting to death of the old and a bringing to life of the new. So Paul writes:

Romans 12.2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

There are, Paul insists, two interwoven realms in which we can live while living here on earth, and every person lives in one realm or the other.

There is "this world," or, as this passage literally says, "this present age." That is the spiritual arena that excludes God from his proper place of rule in our lives, and which has us living our lives for ourselves instead of for him.

It is also called "the kingdom of darkness" and it operates by its own set of ethics and rule of law.

Listen to how Paul describes the patterns of this present age in which we now live, and the vision and values of those who are part of it.

II Timothy 3.2-5

People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving,

slandorous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power.

As long as we are part of the present age, that is the self-at-the-center way of thinking and seeing and relating that is being formed in us.

Actively formed in us. We are being actively disciplined by the world and its values and priorities.

And then there is "the Kingdom of God", also called "the Kingdom of heaven" and "the Kingdom of light." That is the realm in which men and women recognize God's right place on the throne, and seek to place themselves under what Bonhoeffer calls "the kingly rule of Christ."

The rule of law in the two kingdoms couldn't be more different.

The fundamental rule of law in this present age is putting the self first, and the primary posture of the heart among its subjects is one of self-importance and self-reliance.

But in the Kingdom of light the fundamental rule of law is the royal law of love, and the primary posture of the heart among its subjects is one of humility.

When we become followers of Jesus, we shift the deepest allegiances of our heart, and begin to build a life that no longer has us as the center, but him.

On Friday I was blessed to attend Matthew William's naturalization ceremony, when he and eighty-nine others from thirty-seven different countries became US citizens, and this is part of what they promised:

The US Oath of allegiance for new citizens says:

I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or of which I have heretofore been a subject . . . and I will bear true faith and allegiance [to the United States of America].

That profound reorientation of our deepest allegiances is what happens when we become followers of Jesus. We completely shift the footing on which we rest the weight of our lives, which leads to a profound shift in the way we see and in the way we live every aspect of our lives.

Notice the verbs here, unlike all the other verbs that will follow in the rest of chapter 12, are passive – these are things that are done to us rather than things we do. Paul says: Don't

allow yourself to be conformed to the pattern of this world. Instead, *let yourself* be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

I love how the JB Phillips translation puts it.

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within.

So our being transformed in our way of thinking, our being transformed into the likeness of Jesus, is a work of God. It is something he does that we have to ask for, and then it is something we have to cooperate with once we ask for it

You remember the story of *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, when the little deer comes to the altar and kneels and offers herself.

Then the story takes an unexpected turn. She reaches into her heart and tries to pull out of it all of her natural human loves, her pride and bitterness and resentment and self-concern and fears, but she can't extract them.

She was not able to do this thing which he had asked of her. Having reached the altar, she was powerless to obey.

Then Jesus steps forward: "I am the priest of this altar. I will take it out of your heart if you wish."

She turned toward him instantly. "Oh, thank you!" she said. "I beg you to do so."¹⁰²

The priest put forth his hand, right into her heart . . . There was a sound of rending and tearing, and the [selfish] human love came forth.

He cast it on the altar and spread his hands above it. There came a flash of fire and after that nothing but ashes remained. Nothing of the [selfish human] love itself, which had been so deeply planted in her heart, and nothing of the suffering and sorrow which had been her companions on this long, strange journey. A sense of utter, overwhelming rest and peace engulfed her. (102-103)

So here is Paul's message to this point.

***Jesus offered his life as an offering for you.
Offer your life as an offering back to him.
Let him make you new.***

Pausing here . . .

Who are you letting form the way you see, and think, and relate to others?

What voices would you say are the loudest in shaping your thinking? What influencers have your ear?

In Philippians 2.13 Paul writes:

God is at work in you to will and to work according to his good pleasure.

How are you cooperating with that work by actively putting ourselves in places that will contribute to our growth in Christlikeness - worship, bible reading and study, time with other followers of Jesus?

* * *

Now we come to the final section.

Romans 12.2

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

I think the NIV is generally a very reliable translation. But this phrase "test and approve what God's will is" is really unfortunate and misleading.

First, it sounds like we are invited to test God, which we know from other parts of Scripture we're not supposed to do.

Second, it sounds like we get to look over God's will, see what we think, and then do only those parts we approve of.

And third, I think it reinforces the idea that the will of God is little more than his preference when we come to a fork in the road and it comes time for us to make a decision.

Other translations are much more helpful. They say, then you will be able to know, or determine, or discern, or understand what God wants you to do.

This takes us back to where Paul started, with him urging us to live our lives for God.

Over the past fifty years, the idea of God's will has shrunk down from its intended meaning to something much narrower and diminished from what God first had in mind.

When the scriptures speak of the will of God, they are addressing the question not of who gets to make the call at this intersection of my life, but whose will is ruling over every part of

my life. The question isn't what is the direction but who is the director? Not who gets to make the call this time, but who gets the last word every time?

When Jesus calls us to deny ourselves in Matthew 16.24, the basic meaning of the word *deny* is “say no to.”

Deny what? Not my worth or value, but my *will*.

When it comes to God's dealings with us and our dealing with him, we could understand the Christian life in four stages.

Stages of the Christian Life

I'm in it for me.
 God's in it for me.
 I'm in it for God.
 Your will be done.

I'm in it for me. To begin with, “I'm in it for me.” Apart from Christ, I occupy the center. It's all about me.

God's in it for me. Then I begin to hear rumors that there is a God who loves me. I discover that in love he sent his son to “bring me home to God” (1 Peter 3.18). I widen my arms to make room for this loving God in my life. He begins to open my eyes to his love and his loving involvement in my life, giving me life and everything else that I need. My perspective shifts. “God's in it for me.”

I'm in it for God. Then, as time passes, I begin to see more clearly who God is and what I owe him. He is my loving King with loving designs on my life and he justly deserves my love and service. I begin to see my time and talents and resources as something I can give back to him. No longer just thinking about myself, I consider how I might love and serve him. The next shift happens. I now say: “I'm in it for God.” But still I am in charge. It's still on my terms. There's one more threshold to cross: the threshold of surrender.

Your will be done. As my understanding of God continues to grow, I come to see that God is worthy of my whole life. So I relinquish myself fully to him. I turn over my will and let him be in charge, saying: “Your will be done.”

The Scriptures hold out a key picture of this final stage in Jesus himself, kneeling in the garden of Gethsemane at the close of his life, facing the enormity of his coming death but relinquishing all to the Father nonetheless. He too says, I want what God wants. “Not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22.42)

All through the scriptures we are invited to follow the example of Jesus and invite God to bring our wills in line with his. Including in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray.

Matthew 6.10

Your will be done.

Jesus calls us to line up our wills with his. And because we were made for this, our surrender will not just be good and pleasing and perfect for God, as Paul says. It will be good and pleasing for us as well.

So stepping back and seeing the passage as a whole ...

Jesus offered his life as an offering for you.

Offer your life as an offering back to him.

Let him make you new.

Then you will understand how he wants you to live your life for him.

And pausing here . . .

In many respects, the whole of the life of faith comes down to this central decision: whose will will we consent to and whose will will we refuse?

As CS Lewis so masterfully frames it:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done."

When Paul calls us to lay down our lives for God, he calls us not to diminish ourselves, but to relinquish our will. To line up our will with his. Not a tense-jawed, reluctant giving over, but a glad surrender. An entire life that is a joyful "Yes!" to God.

* * *

Back to the man with whom we started:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, concludes this:

Only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ. . . . The call to discipleship ... means both death and life. 90

How are we to drive out [a life centered on the self?] . . .

The only way to do this is

by letting Christ alone reign in our hearts,

by surrendering our wills completely to him,
by living in fellowship with Jesus,
and by following him.

Then we can pray that his will may be done. 164

I want to invite you, during our closing song, to surrender your life and relinquish your will to Jesus our King. It might be for the first time. Or it might be for the three hundred and first time.

The one who offered his life for us is worthy of our offering our lives back to him.

Closing Song

1 All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.

Refrain:

I surrender all, I surrender all;
All to Thee, my blessed Savior,
I surrender all.

2 All to Jesus I surrender,
Make me, Savior, wholly Thine;
Let me feel Thy Holy Spirit,
Truly know that Thou art mine. [Refrain]

3 All to Jesus I surrender,
Lord, I give myself to Thee;
Fill me with Thy love and power,
Let Thy blessing fall on me. [Refrain]