

*Paul places his account of the Christian life – how Christians are to live – intentionally after having described and explained their great salvation. The Christian life is the effulgence, the overflow of the grace of God. Christians do not keep God’s commandments in order to be saved, but because they have been saved.*

## **“The Order of Life”**

**Romans 12:1-2**

**March 14, 2010**

**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Romans has two major parts or divisions and we begin the second this morning.

### **Text Comment**

- v.1 The verb translated “present” is the same Greek verb found in Romans 6:13, 16, and 19. There Paul had said that Christians were not to “*present* their members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness,” as they once had. There Paul was very general. Now he will proceed in greater detail to describe the life that followers of Jesus Christ ought to live. It is a reminder that the final chapters of Romans have already been anticipated in a general way. We have already heard of the Christian life, at least in general. Now we are going to find out what it is more specifically.

It is interesting, by the way, and will become clearer as we proceed into this material that the description of the Christian life that Paul gives us bears a close resemblance to the ethical teaching of the Lord Jesus as we read it in the Gospels. They are, as Paul twice calls his ethics, “the law of Christ,” (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21) and in particular they resemble in a number of details the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. [Bruce, 225]

The term “bodies” here is not a specific reference to the physical part of man, but to his entire self. We are to hold nothing back. [Cranfield, ii, 598-599] We are to give ourselves to God as a sacrifice, which is to say, we are to offer ourselves to God in the recognition that we belong wholly to him and so we must strive to be worthy of him, as the next phrase indicates.

“Spiritual worship” thus sums up the point: our lives are to be the worship and service of God at all times and in every way. The worship of the Lord’s house and Lord’s day is simply to be a corporate and focused concentration of that constant self-surrender of the Christian in the obedience of his or her life before God. [Cranfield, ii, 602]

- v.2 By “renewal of your mind” Paul means the gaining of moral perception and sensitivity that will direct the believer into the paths of godly living. The renewal of the mind is, of course, the Holy Spirit’s work as Paul has already said in chapters 6, 7 and 8, but it is a work in which we have a role to play.

Those of you who have been Christians for some time and have read the Bible through a number of years will know that what we have before us here in Romans 12:1 is perfectly characteristic of

Paul's writing. There are two great areas of biblical truth: doctrine and practice, or theology and ethics. An account of what God has done for us and an account of what we are to do for God. Romans 1-11 is doctrine or theology, a magisterial account of what the Lord has done for us in saving us from sin and death. Romans 12-15 is practice or ethics, a searching exposition of the Christian life. And the connection between the two sections of Romans and the two areas of the Christian faith is this single word: *therefore*. It is post positive in the Greek language which means it is one of those small little words that never occurs first in a Greek sentence. But it is first in the thought of this sentence.

With this *therefore* Paul is saying to his readers, "Because of everything that that I have already explained to you regarding your great salvation, because of the grace and mercy of God that has been lavished on you in defiance of your ill-desert, in view of the suffering and death of Christ to secure your eternal life, a sacrifice offered while you were still his enemies, I say, in view of all of this, *this is how you ought to live.*" Doctrine is never taught in the Bible for its own sake. It is taught *to produce a response in us*. And that response ought to be love and gratitude that seeks to express itself in a life of obedience to him and service offered to his cause. This *therefore* is Paul's way of saying what Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room the night of his betrayal: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." The Christian life comes out of the believer's love for God and Christ which itself is the result of what God has done for him or her.

We find this Pauline *therefore* in a number of other places. It concludes the theological section and begins the ethical section of two other letters: Ephesians (4:1) and Colossians (3:1). It functions there in just the same way it does here. It places the Christian life in a relationship of dependence upon the grace of God and the redemption of Jesus Christ. But we also find the same thought in other places and expressed in other ways, for example, in Phil. 1:27:

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ..."

Again, our Christian life is to be lived in response to the gospel and the forgiveness of our sins. And, of course, it isn't only Paul who connects the gospel to the Christian life in this way. In remarks very similar to those of Paul here at the beginning of Romans 12, and after giving an account of our salvation in 1 Peter 1:1-12, the apostle Peter continues,

"*Therefore*, preparing your minds for action and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct..."

Once again, theology/doctrine first, practice/ethics second.

Interestingly, there is a debate about how to translate the word the ESV and NIV translate "spiritual" at the end of v. 1: "which is your *spiritual* worship." The word is *loqikē*, a form of our word "logical." "You may remember that in the King James Bible that same word is translated "reasonable:" "which is your reasonable service." One of the finest commentators on Romans, C.E.B. Cranfield, argues that is the better translation. We are to offer to God a *rational* or *reasonable* worship, not rational in the sense of having to do with the mind, or our worship

being logical, but rational in the sense of being consistent with a proper understanding of the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ. [ii, 604-605] If that is the proper translation, that term “rational” confirms in another way the meaning of the “therefore” at the beginning of the sentence. One can draw a straight line from the salvation of God to the life of a Christian. A truly Christian way of life is what follows reasonably from the grace of God. Christian ethics are, in other words, the ethics you would expect to derive from the story of salvation you have read in Romans 1-11, *these* are the ethics of the Christian life.

Now there is a world of significance in this connection of thought, in this order, an order that is invariable in the Bible, the order between theology and ethics, between doctrine and practice, between God’s grace and salvation on the one hand and the Christian life on the other. The theology always the first thing, the ethics or way of life always the second. This order is fundamental to a right understanding and appreciation of both Christian theology – that it leads inevitably to a different life – and ethics – that the Christian life flows out of that salvation, is related to that salvation, dependent upon that salvation and is motivated by that salvation.

We use in our worship here from time to time questions and answers from the Heidelberg Catechism, an early catechism of the Reformed church, first published in 1563. That catechism, if you remember, is divided into three parts: after two questions of introduction, the next nine are a section entitled “The Misery of Man;” the next seventy-two questions are a section entitled “The Redemption of Man” – the section that contains the account of God’s salvation and how he communicates his grace to his people –; and the last forty-three questions – those concerning the Christian life and how it is to be lived – are a section entitled simply “Thankfulness.” In other words, the Christian life is the grateful and loving response of those who have received the salvation of God. Once again, notice the order. Theology first, ethics after!

Every one of you old enough to remember the Watergate hearings that brought down the presidency of Richard Nixon, remember the question asked again and again of one White House staffer after another: what did he know and, even more importantly, when did he know it? It makes all the difference in which order, in what chronology events unfold. A man may know something about some criminal activity and be completely innocent himself because he neither had the knowledge nor acted on it at a time when such action would have been criminal. If one learned of the cover-up only after the events themselves he obviously could not have been a conspirator. We pay great attention to the order of things in life. Order is often the proof of things in life.

Well so it is in the gospel. Order is everything. Chronology is everything. If men and women know to do some good things and seek in some way to do them – as many human beings do, of course – but do not know the love of God or the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, do not know the life transforming work of the Holy Spirit, and if in their obedience they are not giving thanks to God and not loving him, they are not and cannot be truly serving God however much they may suppose they are. There is no true obedience to God and no true service offered to him that is not the response of a grateful heart to God’s immeasurable gifts already given and received. The Lord looks upon the heart and to him, motive is almost everything. The reason and the motivation why something is done has everything to do with whether or not it is done rightly and well.

This is an extraordinarily important point and Christians must understand this clearly. We aren't the only people to say that people should love others as they love themselves or that they should be honest or kind or faithful. We aren't the only ones to say that people ought to be humble, as Paul will say in the verses that immediately follow those we read this morning. A great many non-Christians think that and say that. There is a great deal of ethical instruction in the Bible that you can find in the teaching of other religions and other philosophies of life. We should not be surprised that that; God has written his law upon the hearts of all men. We aren't the only ones to say that we ought to be good and do good. But the Bible places that ethical teaching in a particular context, in a particular order, and that context and order transform that teaching into something else, something higher altogether and something fundamentally different.

Order can be essential to the meaning of things. You will have noticed as you read your Old Testament how much attention is paid to the order in which things are done in the sacrificial rituals of the tabernacle and temple. In Leviticus we read that first this is to be done and then this and then this after that and so on. The reason is that the order in which things are done conveys so much of the meaning of each of the particular steps or parts of the ritual. For example, before the sacrificial animal was killed the worshipper laid his hands upon it. The hands were laid upon the animal when the animal was still alive. This was essential and always in that order. First laying hands on the animal and only then killing it. The meaning of the ritual is made clear by the order in which things are done. The man transfers his guilt to the animal and then it is killed in his place as his substitute. This was an immensely important picture of the greater sacrifice that would eventually be made by the Son of God. The punishment for the sacrificial worshipper's sins is borne by the animal killed in his place, identified as his substitute by the act of his laying his hands on the animal before it was killed. If the animal were killed first and *then* hands laid upon it, we would have a different religion altogether, one in which God was appeased by presents, as if he wanted the animal for himself, as if he were hungry and needed the meat. That is actually the way the pagans thought. The laying on of hands in such a case would simply indicate that this sacrifice was the gift of this particular worshipper. He wanted credit for his gift and in this way he identified it as his own. Is our faith based on an act of substitutionary atonement or is it based on the notion that if we give enough gifts to God he will be well disposed toward us. It all depends upon the order of events. Lay on hands first and then kill the sacrifice and we have Christianity: the message of Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, dying in our place and bearing the punishment for our sins. Kill the sacrifice and then lay one's hands on it and we have paganism. The same two acts; only the order is different. But the order determines the meaning of everything.

Or take another example. If a man sleeps with a woman and then later marries her, that is, according to the Bible, the order of death. If, however, he first marries the woman and then sleeps with her, that is the order of life. The world thinks, "What difference does it make. You're doing the same two things." But the order in which they are done makes all the difference in the world. In one case sex is outside the place God made for it, it becomes an act of rebellion, and, as we have seen a thousand times, outside its proper place sex corrupts and destroys rather than joins two hearts and two lives. But placed in its proper order, after marriage, sex becomes the life-giving and love-completing act God made it to be. Things must be put in the right order or they become very different things all together. Well, that is true in an even greater way here. If

you put Rom. 12-16 before Rom. 1-11 you have one religion; if you keep Paul's order you have Christianity. This is so important because what we learn in the Bible and what we observe throughout church history is that maintaining Paul's order is unnatural to sinful human beings and even in the church it is reversed again and again, as if Romans 12-15 came first and 1-11 came second; as if our obedience led *to* our salvation instead of coming *from* it. At least at the beginning the church rarely actually disputes specific things Paul said; it loses its life simply because it reverses Paul's order and put ethics first and salvation second! In this way it cuts its life off from its source.

I read the other day of the early years of ministry of the Scottish pastor, Thomas Chalmers, whose conversion to living faith in Christ in the middle of his ministry was the opening event in the revival of the Scottish church in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chalmers was a minister but he wasn't a Christian. He was utterly blind to how thoroughly he had mistaken the Bible. He said to his congregation, "Let us tremble to think that anything but virtue can recommend us to the Almighty." In other words, he had put Romans 12-15 first. Salvation is granted to those who live a good life. What is that but the complete repudiation of Paul's order of life as it is expressed here with the *therefore* in Romans 12:1.

I will remember to my dying day the moment years ago in my office – not the beautiful office I have now, not even the second office I had after the sanctuary was remodeled in 1990, but in the original pastor's office that only some of you will remember – when a young mother became a Christian while I watched. This has only happened to me once in my life. I actually saw the light of life dawn in her eyes! She and I were talking about the gospel. Some folk in the church who were her neighbors had been witnessing to her for some time and she had been coming to church for awhile, but the truth was still not clear to her and one of her friends had sent her to me to try to un muddy the waters. And I had been explaining the gospel to her, apparently without much success. And, as I realized later, her sticking point had been just this. The Bible is full of commandments to do good and she knew that Christians were committed to being good people. She had no difficulty understanding that. That made perfect sense to her. If the Christian faith helps you to be a good person, she had no difficulty with that. Christianity was about being good people. What was so difficult to understand about that? Why were her friends still acting as if she were not a Christian as well?

But how Christ and the cross fit into that message about living a holy and faithful life: all of that remained opaque to her. And in the goodness of the Lord it occurred to me to say to her, "Virginia, Christians don't keep God's commandments *in order to* be saved; they keep God's commandments *because they have been* saved." Just that; just that simple remark. And the cobwebs blew away and all became clear to her. I literally could see all the pieces of Christian faith click into place in her mind. She and her family moved away some years ago, but she called me sometime back from New Mexico simply to let me know that she and her husband, who became a believer after she did, and her children were still walking with the Lord and were as committed Christians as ever.

There is a tremendous emphasis placed in the Bible on the way Christians ought to live, the commandments they ought to keep, the service they ought to render to God. Huge tracts of Holy Scripture, because the Bible is written for believers primarily, describe in detail the godly life

and illustrate it both positively and negatively. The Bible is full of heroes and villains whose lives are held up to us as an example or a warning. We must live as these men and women did; we must not live as these others did. There is a lot about life and how to live in the Bible.

But all of the Bible's ethical teaching – by all of the means by which that teaching is conveyed – is found in a particular context and placed in a particular order. God's grace comes first, Christ's cross comes first, the Holy Spirit's renewing ministry comes first; only then can a man or woman, boy or girl, live a truly good life; only then will he or she even want to. Love is what empowers godly living and we love God for one reason and one reason only: he first loved us! Our power to live a truly good life, our motive to do so, no matter the sacrifice required, and our pleasure in doing so: it all comes from the knowledge of what the Lord has already done for us and given to us through Jesus Christ his son. Theology first, salvation history first, then the Christian life, then obedience, then purity, then love, and then service.

Listen, to live the Christian life is no easy matter. It is in fact far and away the most difficult thing in the world *really* to live it in the heart as well in one's speech and behavior. To love your neighbor as yourself, to guard your heart against impurity because the Lord looks upon the heart, to live as becomes the followers of Jesus Christ in love, in peace, in generosity, in kindness, in truthfulness; I say, it is very hard to do this. If you don't think so, try for a few days actually live to up to the standards that have been set for us in Holy Scripture. Unless a man or woman is compelled to do this, he or she will not.

Did you ever hear this story? I hadn't until I read it last week. A neo-Nazi in Norway named Johnny Olsen, a violent man of 41 years of age who had been convicted of murder while a teenager and had spent 12 years in prison, walked into an Oslo police station in 2004 and confessed to two bombings of a leftist youth organization in 1994 and 1995. He had gotten away with his crime. No one was looking for him. He knew that. He had got off, as we say, Scot free. But he turned himself in. He also led police to a weapons stash. He explained that he felt compelled to confess his sins after watching Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. In court two weeks later, Olsen, in a choked voice told reporters, "Jesus lives, and I distance myself from my past and neo-Nazism."

In Texas at about the same time one Dan Leach, after seeing the same film depicting Christ's suffering and death, volunteered to police that he had murdered his ex-girlfriend. Her death had already been ruled a suicide. He had covered up his crime so successfully that the case was already closed. The young woman had thought, so the police concluded, that she was pregnant and she would have to raise the child alone and the thought was too much for her. Dan Leach had actually killed his former girlfriend because her pregnancy was an embarrassment to him. As it turned out, she wasn't pregnant after all. But no matter, Leach had got away with his crime. The police had bought the suicide. He was in the clear. But after watching the film he knew that God required him to confess his crime and that without such a confession there was no possibility of his being forgiven. Christ did not go to the cross for murderers who refused to own up to what they had done.

Now I know nothing about these two men or their subsequent history. But they illustrate Paul's "therefore" in Romans 12:1 perfectly. You can't truly believe that God sent his son into the

world for that kind of suffering and that kind of death in order that all who believe in him might have eternal life; you can't believe, really believe, that God has lavished his love on utterly undeserving sinners like you and me; you can't believe that God is ready and willing to come into a sinner's life and transform it; I say you can't really believe these things and your life remain the same. Once you know what God has done, what Christ has suffered for you, what the Holy Spirit has done in you, I say once you know these things love and gratitude and honor compel you to live in that way you know pleases God. And the motivations of love and gratitude are so powerful that they will make you willing to do what you would never otherwise have ever been willing to do. Indeed, the motivation is so powerful that it can lead a man to volunteer to accept his punishment for a crime he had committed with no one the wiser. Leach went into court, admitted what he had done, admitted that he deserved whatever the jury gave him, and received a sentence of 75 years.

There are many reasons to do the right thing, but nothing in human life can begin to compel a man to do what is right in thought, word, and deed, to struggle always to do what is right, apart from a motive as powerful as gratitude to God for the incomparable gift of his love and the eternal life that Christ has purchased for those who trust in him. To the person who understands Romans 1-11, doing what God says is right, doing what pleases him becomes the most obvious, the most inevitable thing and the great passion of his or her life. It couldn't be otherwise. Such a life as pleases God, such a life as is the reasonable response to Christ's redeeming love is the least you can do. It happens also to be the most that you can do, mere human being that you are. It is all you have to give to God in return: yourself and your life. And you are compelled to give him those gifts little as they are.

What other love do you know that does not crave to express itself? And so it comes to pass that all over the world people every day and all day are making great efforts to live as they know pleases God, to refuse to be conformed to the world, to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. They resist sometimes very powerful temptations, they sacrifice time and energy to live as they know the Lord would have them live, to love and care for others, to humble themselves before others, to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, to control not only their behavior and what is so much more difficult, their thoughts, because, of course, the God they love and want to please knows their thoughts as well.

All of that in one little word: *therefore*. Three letters in Greek: o, u, n. Wise Christians have always understood that the best way to live a better, holier, more loving and pure life, a more godly life, a more faithful, useful and fruitful life is to keep fresh in the mind and heart the whole grand story of God's grace to unworthy sinners like ourselves and Christ's sacrifice for us and for our eternal life. For the one comes out of the other and it comes from nowhere else.