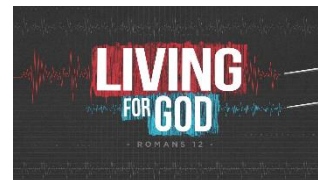


Pleasing God

Romans 11:33-12:2
May 10, 2020



Please Read Romans 11:33-12:2 before going further in this transcript.

Before we dive into this morning's text together, let me begin by giving a brief update on our plans for reopening our church building. This past Thursday our Elders had a special meeting via Zoom to discuss our next steps. While all of us continue to be eager to reopen, we want to be wise about not only WHEN we reopen but also HOW we reopen. Therefore, we have officially commissioned a **Reopening Strategy Task Force** to begin putting together a strategy for how to reopen our church, whenever it becomes advisable and safe to do so.¹ If you have any questions or input for this Task Force, you can email them at Efree@PaulBunyan.net or simply call the church office. For the time being, we are following the recommendation to stay at home through at least May 18. We will be monitoring the information closely and we'll give regular updates as our plans to reopen progress. Please PRAY for this Task Force to have great wisdom and insight into this unprecedented challenge. Pray that we will not open any SOONER nor any LATER than we should.

For today, I'm excited to launch into a brand new 3-week sermon series called "Living for God." We are going to spend the next 3 Sundays diving into Romans 12. Romans 12 is one of my favorite chapters in the New Testament! Please begin by turning in your Bible to Romans 11:33. Even though Romans 11:33-36 may seem like a beautiful closing doxology, they also serve as Paul's introduction into Romans 12.² Paul begins in Romans 11:33, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" Can you hear the awe and wonder in Paul's tone?³ He begins in verse 33 with the exclamation "Oh!" As in "Oh my God!"⁴ But not in a sacrilegious way; in a very reverent and awestruck way. Then, in verses 34-35, he continues to express his awe and reverence with some rhetorical questions. The answer is the same for all 3 questions: Who has known the mind of the Lord? (Answer? Nobody!) Who has been his counselor? (Nobody!) Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" (Again, nobody!) None of us is in any position to demand anything from God!⁵ Paul concludes this doxology with Romans 11:36, "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." This is a power-packed collection of prepositions! All things are from, through, and for the Lord. (Some translations say "to" Him) **From** means God is the source of all things. **Through** means God is the sustainer of all things.⁶ **For** means God is the purpose of all things. Then Paul concludes, "To HIM be the glory forever! Amen."

And then, in an overwhelming overflow, this doxology spills over, as Paul goes on in Romans 12, to urge us toward "Living for God." He begins Romans 12 with a clear call to every Christ-follower: **Offer your entire self as a living sacrifice to God!** In other words, a flood of heartfelt worship pours out from a grateful heart, and it inspires Paul to urge us toward godly living. The Apostle Paul is absolutely blown away by the many incredible mercies of God! How about us? Do we still marvel at God's incredible mercies? In Romans 12:1-2, Paul clarifies at least three things about offering a living sacrifice: First of all,

A living sacrifice... 1 ...is inspired by God's awesome mercy. Paul begins in Romans 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice..." We dare not lose sight of God's awesome mercy. The incredible mercies of God should take our breath away. At times, as we truly begin to comprehend just how awe-inspiring it is, God's mercy should completely overwhelm us.⁷ Please turn your Bible back to Romans 1. Let's do a brief fly

¹ Questions and comments can be directed to our Reopening Strategy Task Force at Efree@paulbunyan.net or by calling the church office at 751-8834 and asking for Pastor Eric.

² Imagine if I preached for 11 chapters, then gave a "closing" benediction, and then went on for another 5 chapters. That's basically what Paul does here.

³ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2314, footnote on Romans 11:33-36.

⁴ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 741.

⁵ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 743.

⁶ God is the one by whom all things live and move and have their being. Acts 17:28. See also Deuteronomy 30:20; Job 12:10; and Daniel 5:23.

⁷ Consider also Isaiah 6:1-5.

over of God's awesome mercy in the first 11 chapters of Romans. As I read through Romans 1-11 last week, I found myself saying out loud, "wow!"

God's awesome mercy... offers salvation to everyone!⁸ One of the most well-known verses in all of Romans, is Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes..."⁹

God's awesome mercy... shows patience in withholding judgment! He gives us time to discover Him. Romans 2:4 says, "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"

God's awesome mercy...¹⁰ weaved together a history of salvation by grace for all peoples!¹¹ Romans 4:16 says, "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all." Many of us know the song: "Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham. And I am one of them and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord!" We couldn't do it by our own effort! The entire Old Testament story builds toward the crescendo of Jesus Christ who came to rescue ALL peoples! God treats each one of us better than we deserve!¹² And then, He continues to do so, day after day, even when we stumble and wrestle with ongoing sin and unrighteousness. God has a history of showing mercy!

God's awesome mercy... demonstrates His love even while we are still sinners! Romans 5:8 tells us, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."¹³ ¹⁴ (While we were still wicked and evil.)

God's awesome mercy... adopts us as His own children, making us co-heirs with Christ! Romans 8:15-17 says, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ..."¹⁵ (This includes sons AND daughters.)

God's awesome mercy... sends out preachers to share the Good News! Romans 10:15 says, "...How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Aren't you incredibly grateful that God sent someone to share the gospel with you!? This is even further evidence of God's awesome mercy! Even though Romans 1 says that mankind is without excuse, since creation reveals God's power and divine nature clearly, His mercy is SO GREAT that He also sends His message out to us! Now, we've only had time to look at just a few of the many examples of God mercies toward us.¹⁶ This brief overview is a good start, but it hardly does it justice. So this week, I hope you'll consider reading through all of Romans 1-11 on your own, verse by verse. This will help you gain an even better understanding of the depth and breadth of God's mercy.

⁸ See Titus 3:5a.

⁹ God's mercy also ...makes His existence obvious to everyone! Romans 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

¹⁰ God's awesome mercy also ...makes us aware of our sin problem! He defines what is right and wrong, so that we can see where we have gone astray. Romans 3:20 says, "...through the law we become conscious of our sin."

¹¹ I read a great article this week by a man named "Thabiti Anyabwile." It's a very short article that I found on the Gospel Coalition website. Here is the title, "**God does not justify sinners by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to make salvation easy for us.**" At first, the title sounds like heresy, until those final several words, "to make salvation easy for us." Thabiti then goes on to clarify that purchasing our salvation was not easy: "Christ purchased our salvation with His own blood. The agony of Gethsemane was eclipsed by great groanings of Golgotha. The pleadings in the garden gave way to the great cries of the cross. Our salvation came at infinite cost to the Son of God. He suffered holy wrath against the sins of the entire world. It was not easily purchased." You can read the entire article at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/god-does-not-justify-sinners-by-grace-alone-through-faith-alone-in-christ-alone-to-make-salvation-easy-for-us/>

¹² Psalms 103:10.

¹³ God's mercy also ...offers us not only forgiveness, but new life! Romans 6:4 says, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." This is the picture of water baptism. As we are raised back up from under the water, we celebrate our own resurrection to new life with Christ! This is daily, ongoing mercy.

¹⁴ God's mercy also ...empowers us to live righteous lives! Romans 8:4 says, "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

¹⁵ God's mercy also ...daily intercedes for us through Christ and the Holy Spirit! Romans 8:26 and 34, "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." "...Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."

¹⁶ See a much longer list by John MacArthur, *A Living Sacrifice: Romans 12:1-8*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1987, pp. 13-14.

Paul says in Romans 12:1, “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.” This brief overview gives us a better understanding of what led Paul to give this powerful doxology at the end of Romans 11. It’s what then inspires him, to urge us toward godly living in Romans 12. In other words, since God’s mercies are so powerfully evident in Romans 1-11, THEREFORE live this way! Brother or Sister in Christ, as those who have experienced the mercy of God first-hand, let’s follow Paul’s encouragement: Let us therefore offer ourselves as a living sacrifice!¹⁷ A living sacrifice is inspired by God’s awesome mercy. The 2nd thing that Paul clarifies is that...

A living sacrifice... 2 ...is our true and proper worship. Again, Paul says in Romans 12:1, “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.” Bible translators have actually struggled a bit here, with exactly how to get across Paul’s meaning of “true and proper worship.” Paul is bridging the picture of Old Testament sacrifice, with a New Testament illustration of offering our bodies as a living sacrifice. So, it’s a bit tough to convey it, which is evidenced by the difference in our translations:¹⁸ The *NIV* says, “true and proper worship.” The *ESV* says “spiritual worship.” The *NKJV* says “reasonable service” (or rational). The *NASB* says “spiritual service of worship.” The point that all of these translations are trying to convey, is that our worship should be in line with what is reasonable for thinking creatures. Thinking creatures who recognize and understand God’s mercy.¹⁹ In other words, “Sacrificial worship is the natural response of the Christian who realizes all that God has done for [him or her].”²⁰

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful. Imagine that your kitchen table is an altar designed for sacrificing animals. In the Old Testament, when an animal was sacrificed on the altar, it stayed there, because it was dead. But when you and I offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, that sacrifice is subject to our own human volition. In other words, we can climb up and down, on and off of the table as often as we want to. Living sacrifices have to decide each and every day, whether or not they are going to stay on the altar. Far too often, we get on/off of the altar, depending on how we’re feeling that particular day.²¹ Keeping God’s mercy in view, helps us to stay the course of true and proper worship. True and proper worship is designed to be perpetual; to be ongoing. Therefore, a living sacrifice is not limited to a particular time and place, when we can access a physical altar and offer our sacrifice. A living sacrifice means 24/7. This is more than just going through the motions on a Sunday morning.²²

Of course, a living sacrifice is really what God has always desired from His people. Even Psalm 51:16-17 reminds us, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.” In other words, God is no longer calling for dead sacrifices. In fact, He never really needed them in the first place. What God has always wanted, is what those sacrifices were meant to represent: a genuine devotion and dedication to Him and His holiness. A living sacrifice is a holy and pleasing response to the gospel, to the mercy of God. This is why our church talks about “becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together.” God wants our full devotion, our whole hearts, our entire affection. These same bodies with which we commit sin, are the same bodies which God calls us to offer, as a living sacrifice.²³ If our bodies were dead, we’d no longer need to resist sin, the struggle would be over. But as long as our bodies are alive, Christ-followers are called to offer them in holiness and in ways that are pleasing to God. By the way, let’s not take this idea of our physical bodies too narrowly. In other words, offering our physical bodies is really a way of saying that we

¹⁷ See Alan F. Johnson, *Romans: The Freedom Letter*, vol. 2, Rev., Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, p. 88.

¹⁸ λογικός = “pertaining to being carefully thought through, thoughtful.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 598). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

¹⁹ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 2315, footnote on Romans 12:1.

²⁰ John MacArthur, *A Living Sacrifice: Romans 12:1-8*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1987, p. 10.

²¹ Douglas J. Moo notes that “living” modifies “sacrifice,” meaning that it is referring “to the nature of the sacrifice itself: one that does not die as it is offered but goes on living and therefore continues its efficacy until the person who is offered dies.” *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 751.

²² See discussion by See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, pp. 752-754.

²³ See John MacArthur, *A Living Sacrifice: Romans 12:1-8*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1987, p. 19.

should offer our entire selves: our heart, soul, mind, and strength.²⁴ And yes, also our physical bodies. Brother or Sister in Christ, put your whole self on the altar because a living sacrifice is our true and proper worship.

A 3rd thing that Paul clarifies about offering a living sacrifice, is that...

A living sacrifice... 3 ...is sustained by daily transformation and renewal. Romans 12:2 begins,²⁵ “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....” Here it’s helpful to picture ourselves being squeezed into a mold.²⁶ What Paul is suggesting is that the sinful world around us, is pressuring us into its particular form or shape. This is about the outside, negative influences, that pressure us into displeasing attitudes and behaviors.²⁷ There are actually two nuances here; both are helpful to understand.²⁸ One nuance is “do not BE conformed.” In other words, don’t let the world around you squeeze you into their ungodly mold. The other nuance is “do not conform YOURSELF.” In other words, don’t squeeze yourself into a worldly mold, so that the world will accept you or like you.²⁹ This is precisely why we need the next part of the verse. Romans 12:2 goes on, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....” “Mind” here is referring not so much to academics or acquiring raw data, but rather to “practical reason” and “moral consciousness.” In other words, God is transforming us, by the renewing of our minds, so that we can understand what He wants from us; and then, we can know how to put it into practice.³⁰ Renewed minds are not misled by the lies of this world. They are not trapped and tripped up by the wrong thinking of ungodly patterns.

There are times in every Christ-follower’s life, when we need to step back and examine our relationship with this world. We need to ask ourselves a very important question: Who is influencing who? In other words, are WE making an impact on this world, or... is THIS WORLD making an impact on us? Fortunately, there’s a pretty easy way to tell: look in the mirror. Do you see the reflection of Christ or the world? Does our behavior, our attitudes, our financial spending, and our use of time, reflect what is pleasing to God, or what is pleasing to this world? It’s surprising how easy it is, for the redeemed and holy people of God, to grow tolerant of sinful ways.³¹ We can either live our lives “in view of God’s mercy” or we can live “in view of what we watch online.” I don’t know about you, but for many of us, our time watching Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime has gone up lately. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but let me ask you this, “how is your viewing impacting you?” A renewed mind is able to test and approve, what’s coming in through our various screens and mobile devices.³²

Romans 12:2 goes on, “...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.” Brother or Sister in Christ, if we’ve grown tolerant of sin, it’s a clear sign that the world is conforming us, to its pattern. “Testing and approving” is about examining something, to see if it passes inspection. God’s Word instructs Christ-followers, to put each of our decisions to the test, in order to see whether they’re in accordance with God’s will. This becomes much easier over time, as we renew our minds daily, with time in God’s Word. Psalm 119:11 makes it clear, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”^{33 34}

²⁴ See Mark 12:30.

²⁵ Douglas J. Moo notes that “verse 2 is probably subordinate to verse 1, giving the means by which we can carry out the sweeping exhortation of verse 1.” *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 754.

²⁶ συσχηματίζω = “to form according to a pattern or mold, form/model after something.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 979). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

²⁷ See 1 Peter 4:1.

²⁸ See discussion by See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 755.

²⁹ 1 Peter 1:14 urges us, “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.”

³⁰ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, pp. 756-757.

³¹ There are examples of this all throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The Golden Calf, the Corinthian Church, etc.

³² A renewed mind can also monitor the words that come OUT of our mouths and the attitudes that come OUT of our hearts. See Colossians 3:9-10; 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:16.

³³ Take time to read the fuller context of Psalm 119:1-16.

³⁴ There’s a very short and often overlooked verse in Ephesians 5. Ephesians 5:10 urges us, “and find out what pleases the Lord.” For a Christ-follower, what could be more important than this? Consider Philippians 1:9-11, “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”

Unlike the nuances with the word “be conformed” or “conform yourself,” there is no nuance to “be transformed.”³⁵ There is no nuance because we have no ability to transform ourselves. That is something only God can do by His Spirit and through His Word. An interesting way to think about this is to reflect on Jesus’ transfiguration in Matthew 17:2, “There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” That word “transfigured” is the same Greek word that we find in Romans 12:2, “transformed.” Now think about this, just as Jesus “outward human appearance changed to reflect the divine glory within Him, so also our daily transformation ought to reflect the divine glory that has redeemed us from the inside out.”³⁶ Daily transformation and renewal is a process that God continues to work out in His people. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says it this way, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” God’s will for us is good, pleasing, and perfect. And because this is true, it only makes sense for us to abandon the imperfect patterns of this world. The Christian life is all about pleasing God. Not pleasing ourselves. Not pleasing the world around us. It’s about God’s ever-increasing glory!

Brother or Sister in Christ, we are called to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, that is holy and pleasing to God – THIS, and nothing less than THIS, is our true and proper worship!

*This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on May 10, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

³⁵ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 755.

³⁶ John MacArthur, *A Living Sacrifice: Romans 12:1-8*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1987, p. 24.