

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

These two verses are some of the most spiritually dense, power-packed verses in all of Scripture. As a preacher, it's very easy to overstate a truth, to maybe exaggerate a little for effect or out of passion for a truth. But I would say it's difficult to overstate the truth contained in these two verses. Now of course these two verses don't stand alone, do they? They stand upon the shoulders of the eleven chapters that preceded it. There are 279 verses of foundation upon which is built this masterpiece of two verses. If you remove the foundation, the beauty and power are lessened to a significant degree.

These happen to be the first verses I ever memorized in my life. I had been a Christian for about 3 years and I still distinctly remember sitting in my dorm room and making the decision to memorize these two verses. I don't remember why I decided to memorize Scripture but I do know how I chose these verses--by the random flipping of the pages of my Bible. It's not uncommon for young believers to seek guidance in this way.

You may as well put all of the Bible on an enormous roulette wheel and give that sucker a spin. You'd have to stand up and pull down with all your might just to get it spinning. The giant wheel would quickly spin its way out of Leviticus and Numbers, because no one ever looks for guidance there, right? It keeps spinning and if you're lucky, it lands somewhere in Psalms or Proverbs and so you're likely to get something good. But what if wheel stops at Psalm 137:9. "Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" I've never known anyone to claim that as their life verse--thankfully. So I strongly recommend that you not

seek guidance and that you not choose what part of the Bible you want to read or memorize by using the Bible roulette wheel. I did it, but I am telling you not to do it! ;-). But even in the so-called randomness of flipping pages in the Bible, I don't think it was an accident that I landed on Romans 12:1-2. I'd like to say that memorizing these verses immediately began to transform my life, but it didn't happen quite that easy. But I think it was no accident that I chose these 2 verses to memorize as a young believer. From my perspective, it was random, but not from God's perspective.

These two verses answer such important questions as:
How can I know the will of God for my life?
How do I experience more victory in the Christian life?
What is true worship?

This power-packed passage begins with an appeal from Paul. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God.* I am not sure if the word "appeal" (παρακαλέω) is strong enough. You may be familiar with the KJV's "beseech." That is the version I memorized when I was 19. A few translations use the word "urge." The word is nearly beg. Paul is begging them, sincerely asking them, appealing to them to consider what he is about to say. He does this occasionally in his letters but nowhere is his appeal more important than right here.

Most people divide the book of Romans between chapter eleven and chapter twelve. In a general sense, the first eleven chapters are more theological and doctrinal. Wouldn't you agree that we have covered some heavy stuff in the past year in working our way through Romans. I mean we did just cover the topic of salvation and the future of Israel. Why did God deal so differently with Jew and Gentile throughout the history of the world. Heavy stuff. Vitrally important, but weighty.

And in a general sense, from chapter twelve to the end, Paul dealt with more practical topics. If you had to choose, which of the following two verses would you rather dig into and hang onto.

For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy (Romans 11:30-31).

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10)

How about these two options?

Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come (Romans 5:14).

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them (Romans 12:14)

In both cases, the first verse is harder to understand and feels less practical than the second. Romans twelve is a very practically oriented chapter, as is the rest of the book, but I'll say it again, it does not stand alone. I want you to picture Romans 12 to the end like rail cars on a train and chapters 1-11 are the engine. The theology drives the practical. The doctrine in the first part

is the foundation for everything else. So when you see a command like "love one another with brotherly affection," you should ask the question, "Why?" Why should I love others with brotherly affection? Why should I bless others and not curse them? Sometimes Paul will answer the why question with the command but oftentimes he relies on what came before. And that will always be our job as we proceed--to link the practical command with the theological reason behind it. Fair enough?

So the first command is to *present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*. So what's the question we should be asking? Why? Why should I present my body as a living sacrifice. We also have to define exactly what that means but we also have to know why we should do it. And the answer comes before the command. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice*. The phrase "by the mercies of God" means "in view of the mercies of God" or "because of the mercies of God." The NIV has "in view of God's mercy" That is the best translation, in my opinion. The idea is that God's mercy is the ground for my living sacrifice. God's mercy is the reason for my living sacrifice. Because God has given me infinite mercy, the proper response is a living sacrifice back to God.

This brings us right back to the last several Sundays in Romans 11. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all (11:32). Whose mercy is it? It is God's mercy. It literally belongs to him. Who deserves it? No one. Absolutely no one. Do you remember the illustration I used last week of your greatest enemy? If you can think of even one person who is less deserving of God's mercy than you are, then you fail to grasp his mercy. Why? Because if you have zero claim on God's mercy then you can't get less than zero. What do you get when you subtract zero from zero? You have zero. That's how much you deserve his mercy.

Do you get that? Because if you don't, you are going to struggle and be frustrated your entire Christian life. Remember I said that one of the questions this passage will answer is: How do I experience more victory in the Christian life? Victory in the Christian life is directly linked to your understanding of mercy. If your perception of God's mercy is small, then your spiritual growth will be weak and ineffective. But if you have a full blown grasp of mercy, you will be different. You just can't help but be changed by it.

This is so well illustrated in the story of Simon the Pharisee. It is one of my favorite grace and mercy stories in the gospels.

40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

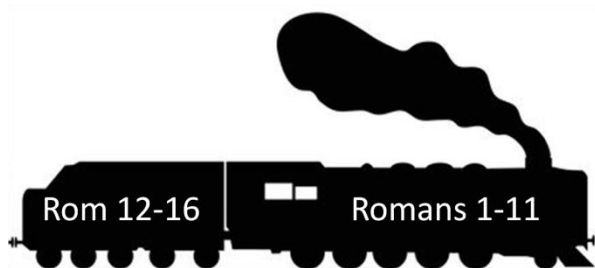
Even Simon, the hard-hearted Pharisee knew what Jesus was driving at. If two people are forgiven two different sized debts, the one who is forgiven the greater debt will be more grateful. Then Jesus leveled the key statement at the end of the story. *Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.*”

If you just take the first phrase by itself, you could very well turn the meaning upside down. *her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much.* You could draw from this that *because* she loved much, she was forgiven much. God forgave her because of her great love. And unfortunately, that is the way that most people view God, Christian or otherwise. If you work hard, God will reward you. Now that just happens to be true in most of life. Hard work usually pays off in some form or another so it's easy to tie hard work to God's favor. And actually, this is exactly what we are supposed to do. Hard work and loving actions are intimately tied to God's favor, but here's the key to it all. You have to get those two things in the correct order.

Let's go back to Simon the Pharisee. God did not forgive the woman because of her great love because Jesus and even Simon said just the opposite. Jesus said, *“But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”* So if you are forgiven little you will show very little love, but if you are forgiven much you will love much. Do you see the order of events? This is absolutely crucial. Forgiveness, or to use Paul's terms in Romans 12, mercy, comes first. God acts and we respond. God gives mercy and forgiveness and our natural response to it is love and gratitude. Again, even Simon understood this by his response to Jesus question. *“Now which of them will love him more?”* Simon answered, *“The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.”*

Simon knew that love flows out of forgiveness and not the other way around. So when Jesus said *Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much,* He meant that her great love was evidence of her having been forgiven. Jesus did not mean that that he forgave her because she loved him. She knew that her "many sins" had been forgiven and as a response to know this, poured out her love on Jesus--literally by tears and oil.

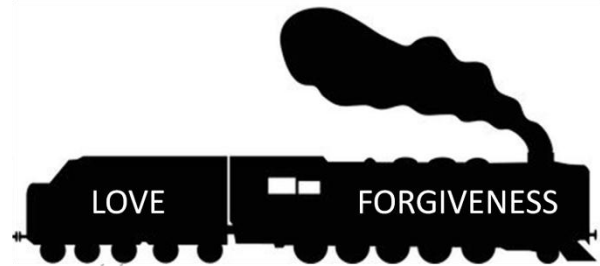
In terms of Romans 12, here's what this woman did. Remember that I told you that Romans 1-11 is the doctrinal train that pulls the practical chapters that come afterward. In other words, mercy is described again and again in chapters 1-11 and mercy will be applied again and again in



chapters 12-16. Chapters 1-11 is mercy explained and chapters 12-16 is mercy applied. By the way, you can't sum up all of the first eleven chapters by a single word, but if you had to, that word would be mercy. I believe this because this is Paul's transition word, isn't it? *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God.* It was his summary word so I think it can be ours. So chapters 1-11 are what? They are mercy

explained and chapters 12-16 are what? They are mercy applied. So the first eleven chapters are the engine of the train--the locomotive--and the remaining chapters are the cars being pulled by the powerful locomotive.

Now let me tell you what this woman did. She backed up the engine of forgiveness and attached it to the rail car of love. Her love toward Jesus was driven by her having been forgiven. Forgiveness was the power of her actions.



This is all that Paul is saying in the first verse. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.* "By the mercies of God." Do you see how the mercies of God are the engine? Verse one is the linking pin that connects the doctrine of mercy and forgiveness to the actions which are supposed to follow.

Let's go back to a verse I showed you before. *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor* (Romans 12:10). So how can I love others with brotherly affection? That action must be powered by the engine of mercy. This is why I am taking so long on this one verse. I don't want us to get in to the difficult commands in the following chapters and get discouraged because we have no ability to obey these commands.

So is it just that easy? Every time we are faced with a difficult command, something that we know we should do but can't seem to get done--do we just hook up the engine of mercy and get things rolling? if it were that simple, then the Christian life would be a piece of cake. Our problem stems from the fact that we have horrible testimonies. Have you ever seen [Tim Hawkins talk about horrible testimonies?](#)



He's right, isn't he? Most of us have never been on crack so we think we have a horrible testimony. But there is real truth here. The woman in the story we've been talking about was on crack. She wasn't actually on crack, you understand, but the equivalent of such. She was a sinner. I mean, when Jesus himself says you have "many sins," that 's not a good sign. If she's not a crack addict, then what did she do wrong? We don't know and all we can do is guess, but here's the important thing. Whatever she did, she was a sinner and she knew it. Sure we can say, "Wow, look at her. She's got such a great

testimony. The worst thing I ever did was talk back to my mom." We don't know what she did but let me ask you this. Out of all of the sinners in the history of the world, do you think she was among the worst? Some of you are answering "no" and most of you are probably thinking the same. That's because we're still stumbling over the crack addict testimony dilemma. We separate big sins from little sins. Major sins from minor sins.

I'll tell you exactly where she stands among the worst sinners in the history of the world. She's right there with everyone else. Whatever her sin had been, she knew full well that she did not

deserve God's forgiveness. She didn't have to read Romans chapter three to understand that that "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." It didn't matter of she was a prostitute, a murderer, a thief and all of those things rolled into one. She was a sinner, separated from God and in need of something she could never have. Mercy.

But hang on. Didn't Jesus tell Simon about a parable of one man who owed 50 denarii and another man who owed 500 denarii? Doesn't that prove that not all sin is the same? Doesn't that imply that this woman believed that she was being forgiven the 500 denarii worth of sins? Maybe some people are only forgiven 50 denarii worth and others ten times that amount? You don't actually believe that, do you? Jesus' entire point is that if you perceive that you have only been forgiven 50 denarii worth, then you will act like you have been forgiven that much. And if you think you have been forgiven 500 denarii worth, you will act in accordance with that belief.

No one is actually forgiven different amounts of sin but everyone has a different perception of their sin. Why did the woman love so much? Had she been forgiven more than anyone else? Did God give her a larger dose of forgiveness? Absolutely not, but her perception of God's mercy was huge. To her, God could not possibly have been more merciful. And what does that perception of God and his mercy do for a person? It completely humbles them. It builds a deep sense of gratitude into their soul. And it's this humility and gratitude that drives love forward. I said mercy is the thing that drives love, and it is. But humility and gratitude are all wrapped up together with love. Would you know how to separate them? How do you pull apart humility, gratitude and love?

So you see, it's all a matter of perception. What is your perception of God's mercy toward you? I want you to personalize this. Don't think in terms of God's mercy toward someone else. What is your perception of God's mercy to you? The woman at Simon's house was a sinner. We don't know what she did, but we know she had "many sins." But that didn't make her the epitome of evil. She was a sinner, just like you and I were. I don't care if you were addicted to crack or if you've lived the straight and narrow life, without Christ's saving mercy, you are just as lost as this woman was before she met Jesus. But do you feel it like she did?

And that is why I am concerned that we fully tackle mercy before we move forward. We don't need to know what it means to offer your body as a living sacrifice until we get mercy. We can't understand how to renew our minds and to work on being transformed until we get this radical idea of mercy. Because every time I say the word mercy, you all have a different idea of what it means and what it means in your life, what it means to you.

This is a main reason why we struggle in our walk with the Lord. Here's an impossible command for you. *Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*, Well, go ahead. Do it. What are you waiting for? It can't be done. If you try to make this kind of sacrifice and effort in the absence of mercy, I guarantee you will end up on the performance treadmill. You know what that is, don't you? The performance treadmill is that never ending walk that never goes anywhere. The performance is when I do things for God so that he will act favorably to me. It's a form of perfectionism where you are always trying to please God but you never measure

up. This kind of life and relationship with God is a never ending treadmill. You can't get off because if you can't measure up to God's standards, then you're in big trouble.

But verse one is the key.

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, **by** the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

Your understanding and perception of God's mercy will either drive your Christian life forward or it will sit in stall mode. And understand that the performance treadmill is stall mode. But the danger there is that since you are moving it feels like progress, but your actually just as stuck as anyone else.

Here's a quick way to test your perception of God's mercy. Are you having difficulty showing love toward a particular person at the moment? Now let's apply the Jesus test to this relationship. Jesus said, *But he who is forgiven little, loves little.*” If you have little love for this person, the problem is clearly related to mercy. It always is. But what you have to determine is whether it is a perception problem or an application problem. In other words, is your perception of God's mercy so small that you have nothing to offer to others? Or, is your perception of God's mercy generally OK but you have failed to make the application to this one individual.

Rich Maurer

October 25, 2014