

Transformed into Sacrificial Service

Spring Sermon Series on Romans

Romans 12:1-21

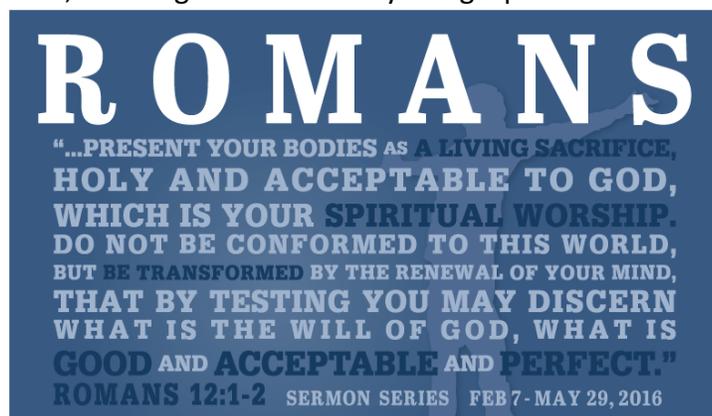
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

May 1, 2016

TEXT: Romans 12:1-21

I have been living in an extended state of exegetical euphoria for about six months leading up to this Sunday, so you will have to bear with my enthusiasm this morning. We are looking at Paul's letter to the Romans this Spring at Kenwood, and hearing this text with an eye, with an ear, to being transformed by the gospel. Romans is not primarily a doctrinal treatise, but it is a



missionary support letter designed to shape you and me and to compel us to join God's mission. As we look this morning at Romans 12, we will discover that the mercy of God that has been displayed in the gospel described Romans 1 through 11 transforms us as a people, as a community, into sacrificial service to the living God. Romans 12 is one of the high points of the entire Bible. It is a passage that unites God's

vision for how we are supposed to live as made in His image and likeness. This text is so extraordinary that I pray God gives us energy and wisdom and open ears to hear the counsel of His will in this marvelous passage.

As we look at Romans 12, I want to preach this passage in reverse order, if you will. Keep your Bible open, and I want to start at the very end, because the ending of Romans 12 is very unusual. Romans 12, beginning at verse 19 says:

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"

This is a very peculiar practice of a distinctive disposition, a very countercultural conduct that is rooted in God's Word. Remember that those to whom Romans was first addressed are a mixture of Jews and those from among all nations, and yet this conduct is rooted in the quotation from Deuteronomy 32:35-36. We don't take revenge; we don't avenge ourselves. We leave this to God. We leave room for God's wrath to have its effect. We don't take matters into our own hands. This is not how people usually act. The ending of Romans gets even more strange in verse 20. Instead of the very sinful human behavior of 'you wrong me and I will take vengeance on you'—you don't need the gospel for that, you are all very capable of doing that, and so am I—the gospel does something quite different. In Romans 12:20, the gospel says:

“To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink;. . .”

You really need the gospel to do that. None of us are capable of doing that. Then the very last phrase says:

“. . .for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”

What a provocative image! This image is so provocative, in fact, that it begs to be interpreted. The imagery itself of feeding your enemy, giving drink to your enemy, is drawn from Proverbs, so we see this peculiar community, of which you and I are called to be a part, lives out of scriptural vision, Deuteronomy, Proverbs. You act in a way that causes burning coals to fall on your enemy's head, and we, in our sinfulness, think: “Ah, great, finally!” and we’re tempted to read this as a negative way, as though the text is saying: “Leave your enemy to God, but try increase his guilt by your kindness.” In other words: “I want to just kill you with how nice I am to you.” We think: “There, that's that. I can live with that.” In fact, the imagery is very different from that. The imagery is a positive image. The imagery in Proverbs of heaping burning coals on your enemy's head reflects the practice attested in Egypt, and another places in antiquity, of carrying a pan of coals on your head as a signal of genuine repentance. Early readers of this passage of Proverbs took it the same way: “Do good to those who oppose you, and God will make him your friend.” This is the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:44-45:

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”

Paul interprets the image himself in Romans 12:21:

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

That is the image, and that is strange. You need the gospel to live that way. It's a peculiar practice. It's a community that is displaying a practice of doing good to your enemy to goad them into repentance and transformation. Do you see how that replays the gospel? When we pull back the lens on Romans 12, we see that this conduct of doing good to those who oppose you as a goad to their conversion is the activity visibly of a strange people living in the world, if you will, in the outer courts. Their unusual behaviors are observed by other people, and the final large section of Romans 12, beginning in verse 9 to the end of the chapter, describes visible action, that Christians behave in this way publicly, and these are all strange. You need the gospel to act in this way, and all of the verbs in this last section of Romans 12 are in the plural. In other words, you can't live this way by yourself; you have to be in a community living this way. Romans 12:9 says:

“Let love be genuine.”

The Greek text says: *“Love should be non-hypocritical.”* It's a genuine manifestation. This is a community of people that is marked by the love of God in Jesus Christ, and that love must be on display. How is it on display? It's on display in our conduct with one another and with those outside the believing community, in the world. This community is to abhor evil and hold fast what is good. You need the gospel for that. In our fallenness, we tend to cling to evil and are dismissive of what is good. We find it very difficult to see the good in someone. Romans 12:10

says:

“Love one another with brotherly affection.”

We need the gospel to do that. You and I have no earthly ties with one another except for the gospel. There is no basis for brotherly affection except in the gospel. Outdo one another in showing honor. You need the gospel to do that. I've mentioned this before, but I'll never forget ending a service with Pastor Alex, our pastor emeritus, and arguing with each other about who would stand on the right as we were leaving. I was trying to honor him as he is my elder brother in Christ, and he was trying to honor me by virtue of my position as senior pastor. We were going back and forth, and he finally said: “Look, the senior pastor stands on the right. No one is to the right of him.” I thought: “Okay, I'm going to honor you by listening to what you said.” I want to be part of a community that outdoes one another in showing honor. Don't you? That's so unusual. How about a community that is not slothful in zeal? The Lord never uses the three-toed sloth as a compelling image of discipleship, and there's good reason for that. I'm not saying the three-toed sloth is not an expression of God's creativity, but it was never used as an image of discipleship. It is not used as an image of discipleship, because discipleship is to be zealous. It's active. It does not let the opportunity float by. We're fervent in spirit; literally we're boiling up. This is a good kind of boiling. Our spiritual temperature is high. We are serving the Lord. We are rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; constant in our prayers. All of these verbs are plural. Romans 12:13 says:

“Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”

There are 6000 international students that come every year to the University of Cincinnati. The vast majority of them never enter an American home, and they long to. The Christian community should be home-openers. It so powerful in a society that is increasingly isolated that the believing community opens their homes to one another. “Come to my house and let's eat together.”

How about this? You really need the gospel for this. We read in Romans 12:14:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”

That's impossible without the gospel. The gospel also allows us in Romans 12:15:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

In the believing community, sometimes those activities are side-by-side, together. I remember, as a moment I will never forget, going to the hospital and visiting someone in our church family who was so despondent, so discouraged, that they were just on the edge of taking their own life and could not see a way forward. I went to the hospital and prayed and wept. They were weeping, so I was weeping. When I left the hospital, I went to a graduation party, and it was filled with young people thinking about the future, the colleges they were going to, celebration, lawn games, everything. There was no transition in between those events, and yet both of those experiences are part of the body of Christ. The ground underneath me was firm because they were both real parts of our life together. You need the gospel to do that: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” You need the gospel to live in harmony with

one another. The ESV translates this next line in Romans 12:16:

“Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.”

To be haughty is always dangerous. That word even sounds bad, *haughty*. You are being *haughty*. But we don't use that regularly. The Greek expression here actually means: *don't do lofty things; don't think of yourself as just doing the good things, the noble things*. “I just serve in leadership. That's all I do.” “But,” he says, “actually do the low things.” Think in terms of: “I take the trash out. I'm the senior pastor, that's right, so I pick up the cigarette butts when I come into the church. It is part of what I do too.” The body of Christ is not just taking the haughty roles, the leadership roles, but the very menial tasks that we share together. The passage comes back in Romans 12:17:

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

That is a gospel life described. We are all supposed to be living in this way. You cannot live this way on your own. You cannot muster the strength to live this way. Almost every one of these verses describes a pattern of thinking and a pattern of living, a pattern of preference for one another that just replays the life of Christ together, and it is supposed to be seen by the community. They will look at us and say: “You people are strange. Haughty is normal; vengeance is normal; taking the honor for myself, that's what's normal, survival of the fittest. You are not going to get ahead; you're not going to have a job; you're not going to have a future; you're not going to be able to attract most beautiful woman in the city; you'll have no chance of finishing the Flying Pig Marathon. You've got to live in this other way, the normal way.” And we say: “No, we are living this completely strange new way,” which we will find out is not new at all.

How do we live this way? Let's back up one more step. Romans 12:3-8 describes how we can live this way. We live this way as members of one body. We live this way with sober judgment by manifesting the Holy Spirit's presence among us. In Romans 12:4-5, Paul describes the body of Christ in this way:

“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

We belong to one another. We have different roles, different gifts, different manifestations of service. I came in early this morning, and I saw all these young men who slept in the church last night finishing up their *30 Hours of Famine*. They were manifesting their gifts, and we need to be displaying amongst one another the gifts of God together. That's how you live in this public way.

From the outer courts, we move, if you will, to the Holy Place. This is inside the Sanctuary. This is the body of Christ discovering their gifts and actually using them. If you don't use your gifts within the body of Christ, then the body's functionality is diminished. If you are an eye and you see something and you don't use it, then the functionality of the body is diminished. If you have musical gifts and you are not using them, the functionality of the body is diminished. If you have teaching gifts and are not using them, the function of the body is diminished. Paul says then in Romans 12:6:

“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:”

Notice that these gifts are manifestations of God's grace. If you have the gift of prophecy, then use it. Display God's wisdom among us, and use it in proportion to your faith. If it is serving, serve; if it is teaching, teach; if it is exhorting, exhort; if it is contributing, do it generously. The word he uses there is *in simplicity*. In other words, no strings attached. If you are leading, then lead with zeal—no three-toed sloths. If you are doing acts of mercy, do it with cheerfulness. Every part of the body working together, full participation, every part moving in ministry. There are no observers in the kingdom of God. There are no inactive players. There are no unnecessary parts. There are no redundant systems. Everyone is important, all contributing what the Holy Spirit has uniquely given them, serving together the body of Christ, the people of God. I want to ask you now: How does such a people come into being? How does the Holy Spirit birth such a people that are visible out in the world? The answer brings us into the Holy of Holies of this chapter, of this letter. It brings us into a passage that N.T. Wright says summarizes Paul's whole written work, and it is Romans 12:1-2. These are the theme verses for our whole series. Let's look at these precious verses together in more detail.

Paul says in Romans 12:1:

“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.”

These bodies are holy. They are pleasing. They are acceptable to God, and this is your spiritual or genuine worship. This new life of the community flows out in response to the mercy of God displayed in the gospel. We need Romans 1 through 11, the great mercy of God to undeserving sinners, of which we all are. That mercy of God then starts to flow to us, and in response to God's mercy, we offer ourselves. Believers offer their entire person, not just your mind, not just your heart, but your hands, your feet, your entire person is offered back to God. Notice the connection here. Our offering back to God is described as a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, a right worship. All of these terms are drawn from the imagery of Leviticus. We preached Leviticus last fall, and I knew from the beginning that this is why we were preaching Leviticus and Romans. We are called in Christ to share this holy calling. Leviticus 19:2 is addressed to God's people and says:

“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

The calling of God's people to be a holy people, belonging to Him, reflecting His character in all their conduct is not a new thing. It is God's purpose articulated to Israel. It connects us up with the vision of Leviticus, and notice that all of the terms are drawn from there. Not only does Romans 12:1-2 connect us up with the narrative of Leviticus, it connects us with Exodus. In Exodus 19:5-6, the point of being redeemed from Egypt, the point of The Exodus is:

“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The point of The Exodus is to let the Lord's people go so they might serve Him, worship Him, so that they would be a holy people belonging to God, displaying who He is in the world. The vision of Scripture comes to fruition, to fulfillment, as described in Romans 12:2:

“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.”

This language of not being conformed to this world but seeing the will of God, recognizing it, and living it out brings us back to the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 1 describes what you and I are supposed to be. God says in Genesis 1:28:

“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

We are to reflect God's righteousness in all the earth. God placed us in the Garden of Eden to work the land and to keep it. These same terms in Hebrew mean *to obey*. It means *to worship*; it means that we are to be in the place of God's dwelling, knowing God, living in accordance with His will, recognizing good and evil, displaying the knowledge of God in the world. The greatest expression of what it means to be a human being is to praise the living God.

This scriptural vision of Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus that Romans describes has come to fruition in Jesus Christ, and it has come to fruition precisely by the renewal that has been accomplished through the cross. Romans 12:2 tells us that we are not to be conformed any longer to this world, this age. When we conform our lives to this age, we live according to the pattern that is described in Romans 1. Remember back at the beginning of the series what happens to us when humanity fails to worship God, fails to thank Him? What happens to you and to me when we stop worshiping, when we stop living how we were created to be? What starts to happen to us is that we start to unravel. Our hearts become darkened, our minds become foolish. We start to spiral increasingly out of control. We actually, as we saw by the end

of Romans chapter 1, fail to recognize God's will anymore. We don't see it. Romans 1:32 says, echoing all the way back to Eden in our fallenness:

“Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”

Our minds are in shambles in our lostness. The good news of the gospel, and I love this, you not only get a new heart, in the gospel, you get a new brain. We need we need a new head. We need a new mind. We need new affections. What happens in Romans 12:2 is that, in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are no longer living by the pattern of this world. That new, radical, strange, unusual group of people that end up with burning coals on people's heads, goading them to repentance, that is possible, and that starts to take place by a people that are not living by this world. The expression that Paul uses for the world is actually *age, this age*. This is such a central idea of how he thinks, and how we must think. We are not living by this *age*. Why not? Why are you and I not living by the pattern of this age? We are not living that way because the new age has begun. When he says: “Be transformed by the renewal. . .,” the term that he uses for *renewal* in this passage is the language for the *re-creation*. In Paul's theological vision, the promised new creation, has actually started, and we are in it. We are supposed to live that way. That vision of Isaiah 65 and 66 of a new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells, you and I are it, and we are supposed to live that way. We no longer build our lives, build our vengeance, on the pattern of this age. We are living with a new heart, a new head, and we are living this life of the gospel of God's new creation that has actually begun. Romans 1 is overturned in glorious victory by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's new world, His new creation, has begun in Christ, and through the gospel, we who have put our faith in Him become what we were made to be from the very beginning. We are made in the image and likeness of Almighty God. We are to be priests and kings in humble, devoted, sacrificial service to the King of Glory.

Romans 12:1-2 encapsulates the scriptural vision of what it means to be a human being. God's new humanity is now on display in the church, and we are supposed to see it with one another. We are supposed to see it out in the world. They are supposed to notice it and say: “What a strange thing.” And when they say: “Why did you not repay evil for evil; why did you not take vengeance? I wronged you and you loved me. Who does that?” The answer is: “God does that, and He did that with me. While I was His enemy, me He loved me and gave Himself up for me, and He has washed away my sins. I am actually in the new creation, and for all who trust in Jesus Christ, the doors are open for you.”

This is the gospel. This is the new creation, and the connection of Romans 12:1-2 to the whole counsel Scripture has brought me into this long exegetical euphoria for six months because it's

true. Some of you will think: "I don't see it yet." That's okay. At some point you will, and you will see who you are really called to be and who Kenwood Baptist Church is really called to be as part of the body of Christ, living this new creation, life by the mercy of God, each part working together, displaying the gospel of a God who sent His One and only Son and offered His life for our sins. The Passover Lamb, who gave Himself for our transgressions and brought peace to us said: "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," and so He poured out His vengeance on the One and only Son so that you and I might be goaded to repentance and new life and utterly transformed into a people living in sacrificial response and dedicated service to Almighty God. The phrase, *that we would be living sacrifices, holy, acceptable*, many translations render as *your spiritual service*. The expression that is used here is: *your logical service, your fitting, appropriate, right, response*. This is where we find out who we are, and we respond to God in praise.

Oh, Lord God Almighty, You are awesome. You have had plans and purposes for us from the very beginning. We thank You that in the gospel we discover who we really are, who we were made to be: priests, kings, sons, and daughters of the living God, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and made into a people of praise, made holy by the mercy of God, not their own deeds. We thank You, Heavenly Father, that You have sent Your One and only Son as a sacrifice for our sins and that in and through Him and through His death and His resurrection you now call us into fellowship with You to display Your character and glory in our life together to the world. Use us, Lord, as Your body in the world, as an agent to goad and incite those around us to repentance and faith. Oh Lord, Your Word is lofty. Your purposes profound. Stir our hearts, we pray as we prepare to celebrate.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.