

Romans: Vessels of Mercy Displaying God's Righteousness

Kenwood Baptist Church Spring Sermon Series

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXT: Romans 12:1-21



Good morning, Beloved. What a joyful place to be on Sunday morning. Praise God. It's good to be together. We continue this morning our spring series on the letter to the Romans. It's a letter that presents a vision of the gospel and draws us into the heart of mission to support it. The gospel needs to be explained, and then the gospel needs to be lived out. This morning, we transition to the latter stages of this beautiful letter. It takes about an hour to read it out loud. In this part of the letter, we discover that the gospel is meant to be lived out together as a family. Christianity is full of doctrines and teaching, and it births a community of people to live it out together.

Important in our faith and in the Bible are several paradoxes. A paradox is a seemingly self-contradictory statement. If we look up the definition of paradox, we find this:

"Paradox: a seemingly self-contradictory statement that upon closer investigation may prove to be true, logical, or even reveal a deeper truth."

Let me test your assessment of paradoxes. How about this one? In 2 Corinthians 12:10, Paul says:

"When I am weak, I am strong."

That's a paradox. That seems contradictory. "I am weak, and when I am weak, I am actually strong." How can that be true? In other words, when I stop depending on myself, and I am filled with the Spirit of God, that's where real strength comes from. That's true.

How about Jesus' words in Matthew 10:39:

"He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

That's a paradox. We tend to be wired toward self-preservation and think, "If I need to hold onto my life, I have to work at it." Jesus says that if you lose your life, that's the key to finding it. What about Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:30 that *"many who are first will be last, and the last first."* Once you get an appetite for paradoxes, you start really enjoying them. You start to ride over the speed bump of the seeming contradiction, and you get ready. What about Matthew 20:26-28:

"True greatness in God's Kingdom comes from being a servant to others."

How about Romans 6:18:

"Believers are made free from sin by becoming slaves to righteousness."

All these paradoxes help us understand that God's ways are very different from ours. That's why we need His Word. We need Him to speak.

We have a vivid paradox in the opening statement of our passage this morning. Romans 12:1 is an appeal:

"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."

That has been the theme of this whole series: we are vessels of mercy. This language of grace and mercy has filled Romans 1 through 11. In light of the mercies of God, the response is to present your body as a living sacrifice. That's the paradox. Do you see it?

Sacrifices are slain. Has anyone ever heard of a sacrifice that comes back to life? That's a striking paradox. But when we think about it, we realize that we just recently celebrated one of those. There is a living sacrifice—just one—and that's Jesus Christ, who offered Himself willingly for us and then came back to life. Jesus is the first living sacrifice, and in response to His giving of Himself, we receive mercy. In response to the demonstration of His love for us, we respond in kind. We reciprocate the love that we have received, and we model our lives in response to the One who showed us what a living sacrifice looks like. We present our body, our physical person, back to God in worship. It's holy and acceptable to God. This is the language of sacrifice.

Holy means to be set apart and reserved for God's use. We are being invited in light of all the theological truths we have heard for 11 chapters, that, in response to the mercy of God, we take our whole person and move it into God's space. My person is claimed for God. Jesus Christ purchases our lives, and that has the wonderful consequence that we are no longer for sale

because we have been acquired. We offer ourselves in response, holy to God, acceptable to God. This is the language of sacrifice as well. That sacrifice is pleasing to God. It rises up.

Paul glosses this paradoxical statement with a final phrase. In Romans 12:1, we read:

“...which is your spiritual worship.”

The ESV renders this as *“your spiritual worship.”* The Greek text says this is *“your tēn logikēn latreían.”* You might hear the word “logic” in this phrase, and in *“latreían”* we get the word similar to “liturgy,” an act of worship or the service to God. It's a little different variation from the word “worship,” which signifies the act of praising, singing, and bowing down before God. *“Latreían”* means the whole service to God, which is described with this adjective.

Hang in there with me for a moment. We have an embarrassment of riches as English speakers of the Bible because there are so many English translations. If we compare English translations of Romans 12:1, we see that there is a lot of variation on this last phrase:

“which is your reasonable service” (KJV)

“this is your true and proper worship” (NIV)

“which is your spiritual worship” (NRSV)

“this is truly the way to worship Him” (NLT)

They are all trying to render these three Greek words, *tēn logikēn latreían.*”

What's going on? When we hear the word “spiritual” it makes us think, “Is he is asking us for spirit-filled worship versus non-spirit-filled?” The charismatics and Pentecostals are saying, “Amen. I knew it.” I love the Holy Spirit, but that's probably not the contrast here. Others say *“this is your rational worship,”* meaning this is the worship of the mind, inward as opposed to external or ritual. That's probably not what's going on either. Some have wondered whether this means spontaneous worship to God versus a scripted worship.

We can see that the translators are wrestling with this, and whenever translators wrestle with something, we know it's not easy. The word *“logikos”* can describe a rational, reasonable worship, but when it's used as an adjective, it's used to describe the proper use of an item. If you have a hammer, the hammer has a proper use. A hammer is not designed to be hurled through your neighbor's window, for example. That's not the *logikos* use of the hammer. A sewing machine is meant to create and repair. It's not the proper instrument to do surgery. A jet aircraft is designed for a certain use. And when the adjective *logikos* is given, it means the proper use of a thing.

Epictetus is a first century stoic writer, popular in the first century and a rough contemporary

with Paul. He grew up in Rome. He wrote this:

“If I were a nightingale, I would do what is proper to a nightingale, were I a swan, what is proper to a swan. In fact I am *logikós* (λογικός), so I must praise God.”

“I am a human being, and so I praise God.” Birds sing and do bird things. That's their creational use. Human beings are created to know God and praise Him and live for Him and share Him with other people.

What is so startling is that, in light of the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, we get our humanity back. We get our proper use of being a human being, which is to praise God and live for Him and reflect Him to other people. Idolatry gives us less and less of ourselves. Sin promises the world but gives us less and less of ourselves. But the mercy of God to us in Christ gives us ourselves back and who we are designed and created to be.

Of all the English versions, I found *The Bible in Basic English* to have the best translation. *The Bible in Basic English* says “*which is the worship that is right for you to give Him.*” That's what it means. It does not mean you are spiritual versus non-spiritual or rational versus irrational. It means that the worship for which a human being is designed, we regain in the gospel.

If you have been with us this whole spring, you may have realized that this reverses what we saw in Romans 1. Remember that in Romans 1, the consequence of our failure to worship God led us into idolatry. What can happen next is that we use our bodies in ways that dishonor ourselves and other people. We hurt people with our human bodies. Yet God's renewed humanity invites us back into who we are created to be. If we are going to live in this renewed humanity, we have a mandate to fill the earth with image-bearers of God who know Him and delight in His ways. God's new humanity is to be on display in the life of the local church.

You might think, “Well, you're the pastor. Of course, you like to be here, or you have to be here.” I love to be here. I love to be with you. I love to see God working through you. It's amazing to me. It's like the most beautiful work of art at the art museum except that it's alive. God's new world is on display. That means that in this new life in Christ, in light of the mercy of God where we get our humanity back, we have to stop being conformed to the pattern of this age. In Romans 12:2, we read:

“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.”

The ESV says “*this world,*” but Paul says “*this age.*” We are age-to-come people who are living here now. None of us are islands. We are all affected.

Have you ever noticed that what you watch online suddenly predicts what's going to be offered to you online? It's a concrete example of how we are constantly being shaped and molded. That's an obvious one. You go to the theater, and you see before the movie starts these flash ads for popcorn and Juju Bees, and suddenly you think, "Boy, I really could go for some Juju Bees." We are easily shaped, not just by advertisements, but also by cultural patterns of what is okay to say or not to say. We are shaped by cultural patterns that say this is the key to happiness or this is the expression of manhood or womanhood that's going to lead to great things. There are voices around that mold us and signal to us what we should think or feel.

Paul says that in light of the mercy of God to us in Christ, those voices and influences should not be the dominant ones. Instead, be remade, be transformed by the renewal of your mind. Does this mean that non-Christians are unintelligent? It doesn't. It doesn't mean that the human brain apart from Christ doesn't work, but it does mean that the human brain and human appetites apart from Christ can be distorted. Again, this harkens back to chapter one. Remember at the end of Romans 1 that failure to worship God leads to idolatry and a dishonoring of our bodies, and the devastating last stop in Romans 1 is that we no longer see the good as good. We do not recognize it, so we cannot say, "That's good." We end up seeing things that are not good and saying, "That seems okay."

The renewal of our minds is that God is at work in us to reorder our thoughts and specifically to help us see God's will. The verb that is used and translated as "transformed" is the Greek word from which we get the word "metamorphosis." It's used in the New Testament only to describe the metamorphosis of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration where the disciples just for a moment see Jesus in His glory. You and I are invited to be renewed from glory to glory. It's just a little bit more reflection of the glory of God that comes about as we are filled with the Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit fills us, we are changed in incremental ways, and we start to see God's will. We see it clearly and we say, "That's good. That's what is acceptable to God. That's what is perfect." It's thrilling to learn to recognize God's will, not just His specific commandments, but God's will for us to act in righteousness and faithfulness. God's will for us is to honor our commitments, to live our lives in humble service. God's will is to reproduce the life of Jesus in people. Have you ever been around someone who is really godly? Someone who makes you feel refreshed just by being around that person? God's will for the world is to make Christlike copies of His Son. We saw that earlier.

This new life is meant to be lived out together. That's where the passage goes next. In Romans 12:3, Paul says:

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

The first step is to level our pride. The first thing that needs to be sort of rubbed off for a strong marriage, for being a good co-worker, for being a good student, a good athlete, and certainly to be a good fellow member of the body of Christ, is to let the proximity of other godly people sand off your pride. Pride is never helpful. It's just not. It's not like taking pride in my work—that's a different use. This kind of pride is arrogance, looking down on you, overestimation of self, underestimating other people. Not good.

One of the favorite New Testament images of the church is the body of Christ. The human body is fascinating, with so many different components and parts, a sophisticated design. There are so many things happening in the human body, both conscious processes and unconscious processes. This is a very apt analogy for the life of the local church. In Romans 12:4-5, we read:

“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 do not all have the same function. We are many, but we are one body in Christ. We are members of one another, which is a beautiful image that we belong together. It doesn't mean that we have uniformity. It would be a bummer if everybody wore the same shirt, and it would be odd if every member of the church did exactly the same thing. That would seem like a cult. Instead, we have humanity with giftedness, filled with the Spirit.

In Romans 12:6-8, Paul writes:

“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”

We are to use the gifts that God gives. The word “gifts” is *charismata*. It's the manifestation of God's grace (“*charis*”) in your charisma. That's what it is—your portion of the grace of God. I know some of the ESV translators and I know how hard it is to translate. I appreciate this. The ESV helps us out here by adding the hortatory subjunctive: “*Let us use them.*” Not to take the wind out of our sails, but this phrase actually is not in the text. The translators put in this phrase because we need it to understand what's going on. The text just says “*having different gifts according to the grace,*” and then goes right into whatever gift you have, use it. If you have the gift of prophecy, use it. And it keeps rolling on. If you have the gift of service, then serve. If it's

teaching, then teach. If it's exhortation or exhorting, then exhort. Whatever God gives you, use it.

The word "exhort" is the first word of this chapter. To exhort is to encourage, to stir up others, to persuade. "Exhort" is a word that we tend to see only in the Bible, and it is different from the word "extort," which is to secure what you want by violence. That is never named in any of the gifts. But you have my absolute blessing to exhort one another if you have the gift of exhortation, or encouragement.

If you have the gift of giving, then give (the ESV says) "*in generosity.*" The word that is used here is fascinating. It just says "*in simplicity,*" which I take to mean that when you give, you give with no strings attached. Those are the best gifts to receive. It's not really a gift if you say, "Here's my gift and here's how you must use it." That's holding on to part of it. So give in simplicity.

When you lead, you lead with dedication and zeal for God. We are blessed. We have a phenomenal team of servant leaders and elders in our church. They are dedicated and they lead with zeal for God, not for self-seeking. It has a great effect on the family.

If you have gifts of mercy and compassion, act with cheerfulness and with a smile on your face. And when you minister to those who are hurting, it makes a huge impact when you see them and notice them and share the love of Christ even on your face.

In Romans 12:9, Paul writes:

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good."

Together, love among us should be genuine. The Greek text says "nonhypocritical." Isn't that the best kind of love? Hypocritical love is not so awesome. That's when someone says, "I love you," and then acts in a way that makes you think, "Whoa, that didn't look or feel like you love me." But genuine love is wonderful. We turn from evil and we cling to what is good.

In Romans 12:10, we read:

"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."

We love one another with a familial affection, and we strive to outdo one another in preferring or honoring one another. I love this quality of God's new humanity. Instead of racing to get ahead of you, I want to race to see how much I can honor and prefer you above myself. The Christian life in a healthy marriage does not work in a 50/50 way. It doesn't keep scores. A godly marriage and godly friendship calculate more like "Let me give you 100%. Let me see if I can get

to 100% first.” What a different mindset that is, rather than keeping track as if to say, “I did this, and now you owe me this.” Jesus gave 100%, so we are 100 percenters by the grace of God.

In Romans 12:11-13, we read:

“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”

In zeal for God, we are not lazy. We are fervent in spirit. We are serving the Lord. We are rejoicing in hope, constant in prayer. We contribute to the needs among us. We show hospitality. All these things paint a picture of a beautiful, renewed humanity. It takes time to live into this and grow into this.

The ending of this section presents us with how this renewed humanity faces its greatest challenge. In Romans 12:14, Paul writes:

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

The greatest challenge in Christlikeness is how we respond when we are attacked. How do you respond when you are misjudged? How do you respond when all is going well and you are trying to live this out in a Christlike way, but there is a conflict? *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”* Who acts like that? Jesus Christ on the cross says, *“Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.”* He is the greatest illustration of Romans 12:14.

In Romans 12:15-16, Paul says:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.”

We are called and given space to *“rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep,”* living together in harmony with one another. Romans 12:17 presses deeper into what can be the greatest challenge:

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”

This, Brothers and Sisters, is such a vivid re-presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus was slandered. He was physically beaten. He was betrayed. And He remained steadfast, faithful to God, and prayed blessing on the very people who were attacking Him. That will put a strong foundation into your soul to act in ways that replicate the gospel.

I was driving this week, heading to a restaurant to pick up some takeout for my family. It was dinnertime and traffic was heavy. I was maintaining what I considered to be a safe following distance. I thought the driver behind me wanted to join me in my car because I could see him and his passenger as if they were in my back seat. It seemed like they were in a big hurry, but I thought I was not going to compromise my safe following distance. They waited for five to seven seconds and then zipped around three lanes to get ahead of me. As they passed me, there was an act of nonverbal communication, a hand gesture. I am preaching Romans 12, so I didn't react. We came to the next traffic light, and their zipping around me to another lane just resulted in that driver's waiting while I slowly rolled past them closer to the traffic light. Just in case I had missed the non-verbal communication, it was offered to me again. This time I just shrugged as if to say, "What are you gaining?" The light turned green, they pressed forward, and I had a third round of the non-verbal communication. Later, I was reflecting on the incident and what I should have done when I got that nonverbal hand gesture. I should have matched it with a non-verbal hand gesture. I should have signaled back, "I love you, man." While we were enemies, Jesus Christ died for us. I should have just flashed the love of God.

That's where Paul ends. In Romans 12:18-19, he writes:

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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.'"

Christians do not retaliate. Aggression and evil get absorbed, and not just absorbed, but stunningly responded to with love. Our animosity toward God led to the cross and forgiveness and mercy, so we leave that to God. Instead of having a driver launch you into road rage or allowing a slanderous comment to cause you to think, "Well, guess what I'm going to post about you." No, the gospel says in Romans 12:20:

"To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.'"

We have this enigmatic phrase at the end: *"for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* There are two interpretations of this. One I think is to be strongly preferred. This is a quotation from Proverbs 25. Some of us may think, "Burning coals—that's exactly what I want." It's like the disciples coming to Jesus and saying, *"Shall we call down fire on these people?"* Jesus thankfully says, "No, no, no. That's not My way." In Proverbs 25, there is one view that says, "Be kind to your neighbor so you really get him ready for the final judgment." There are a few voices in the history of interpretation that take it that way. But that's why we need to do contextual study of the Bible. A lot of the Proverbs reflect wisdom from the ancient Near East, and in the ancient Near East, the imagery of burning coals on your head is a gesture of repentance. So it's

signaling kindness to even your greatest adversary that will lead him to repentance. The Targum translation renders this:

"And so the Lord will make him your friend."

It's our kindness and non-retaliation that can melt the hardest heart. That's the second view of the burning coals. If your interpretation is to incinerate your neighbor, I just want you to know that's the minority view. Most commentators see this as the signifying of repentance, and may that be the case. That makes a lot of sense of the last line.

"Do not be overcome by evil. Overcome evil with good." The world needs people who act like that, just like the living sacrifice we see in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who overcomes evil with good and does so in such a way that then calls us to follow Him. That's our call this morning. I have four brief calls to action.

Number one, **in light of God's mercy, embrace the paradox of being a living sacrifice.** Present your whole body, your whole physical apparatus in service to God, dedicated to Him, present to serve the true expression of my humanity. Get this paradoxical expression in your mind and heart: "I am a living sacrifice. I died to that old way, I am alive into this new way in Jesus Christ, and I am present and here to serve the people around me." That's an imitation of Christ.

Number two, as this passage teaches us, **refuse the dominant shaping influences of this age and culture.** Let go of having the world around you shape what you think and feel and how you act. Instead, welcome the Holy Spirit's renewal of our minds and the motivation of our appetite and expectations, so we can see God's will and call it good and then do it.

Number three, as recipients of God's mercy, we are called into this family, and that means to **find your place here and learn to use your gifts well.** Many of us have gifts that we are not using, and we would love to help you. Some of us are just starting to use our gifts, and we are not using them perfectly. That's okay. We learn to use them, and we grow in doing that together. Find your place in this family and use your gifts.

Number four, **live out God's new humanity together, even when it's hard, difficult, or opposed, and expect God's victory.** Mark our lives, oh Lord, with a non-retaliation so that the love of Christ appears into view. This is the consequence. This is the reflex response to the mercy on display in Romans chapters 1-11, that is to offer ourselves back to God as living sacrifices in dedicated service.

Let's pray.

Lord God, thank You for this morning. We pray that You would bless us and fill us. Forgive us, Lord, and renew and remake us. Help us now this morning freshly to offer ourselves for Your use in the world. We love You, Lord Jesus, and thank You, for You first loved us.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.