

## Romans 12 • The Biblical Definition of “Service”

### Introduction

Paul has spent a **LOT** of time to this point providing the definitive work where the theology of salvation is concerned. He’s explained precisely what some very complicated terms mean like “justification”, “sanctification”, and “righteousness”. Beginning in chapter 12 through the rest of the book, Paul provides the definitive guide to putting these things into practice in our life. They’re not merely terms to be studied and memorized, but indications of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit as we pursue a life of co-death and co-resurrection with Christ.

<sup>1</sup>Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. <sup>2</sup>And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

### [Read v.1-2]

#### **Q: Is this a commandment which Paul is giving?**

A: Paul doesn’t say, “I command you” but rather, “I **urge** you”. This calling is qualified as “*by the mercies of God*”, an appeal to act from the heart based on what God has already done for us, not what we have done for Him.

**Point:** Christians do not serve Christ in order to **obtain** His mercies, but because they **already have** them.

#### **Q: How does Paul characterize true Christian service and living? Where does it begin?**

A: It begins with personal dedication to the Lord.

#### **Q: And in the imagery he is using, WHERE is Paul depicting as the place it begins?**

A: To the reader of Paul’s time, the reference to presenting a sacrifice and the notion of “*spiritual service*” would have described the altar where such things took place in the time of the temple.

**Point:** The Christian who fails in life is the one who fails at the altar, refusing to surrender completely to Christ.

#### **Q: Why might King Saul be an example to us of what it means to “fail at the altar”?**

A; He became impatient waiting for Samuel at the altar. (1 Sam. 13) Taking things into his own hands, he neither followed God’s original instructions and offered the wrong offering nor did he follow the Law by waiting for it to be performed by Samuel. He failed at the altar and it cost him his kingdom. [Note: Cain is another example.]

*“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.*

*Matthew 5:23-24*

**Point:** The motive for our service and dedication is supposed to be love. Our love for God is proved in our love for others, so the quality of our service is a direct reflection of our love for others.

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**Q: What are the similarities and differences to the Old Testament standards of sacrifices to this description of “a living and holy sacrifice”?**

A: The contrast is that Old Testament sacrifices weren't “*living*” but slain and consumed exclusively for God. Spiritually we're to identify with being dead in Christ and exclusively His going forward. The similarity is that all sacrifices, in order to be deemed “*acceptable to God*” must be holy, that is free from blemish and perfect according to His Word. It's a teaching to be rid of sin and dedicated exclusively to His Word and ways.

**Q: How is this offering accomplished on a practical level?**

A: It's the daily yielding of the body to Christ, having the mind renewed by the Word, and surrendering the will through prayer and obedience. This is the true dedication of presenting one's body, mind, and will to God day by day.

**Q: What is implied in v.2 about all Christians? What are the two kinds of person we can be?**

A: We can either be “conformers” – living for and like the world, or “transformers” – daily becoming more like Christ.

**Q: Is this specific word “transformed” used in other places in Scripture?**

1. It's the same word translated “*transfigure*” in Matthew 17:2 to describe what happened to Christ on what we call the “Mount of Transfiguration”.
2. It's how Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 3:18 we are transformed (transfigured) as we allow the Spirit to reveal Christ through the Word of God.

*But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.*  
2 Corinthians 3:18

**Q: So what might be the primary cause for not knowing God's will for one's life?**

A: It's associated with those not fully dedicated personally to Christ.

**Note:** *This doesn't mean we automatically know, minute-to-minute, the exact mind and plans of God, but that our faithfulness and dedication engenders trust that we are on His path regardless of earthly feelings or circumstances.*

**Q: In a consumer-oriented society like ours, products are often presented as “good”, “better”, and “best”. Is this the same for God's will?**

A: No, the label “good” attached here is further qualified as being “*acceptable and perfect*”. The picture is one of growing in our appreciation for God's will.

**Point:** *Some Christians obey God because they know obedience is “good” for them and they fear chastening; others obey because they find God's will to be “acceptable”; the deepest devotion, however, is in those who come to love God's will and find it “perfect”.*

**Q: Going back to the fact that this is all being described as taking place at the altar, what other parallel is this drawing between those who served God according to the Old Testament Law and those who now do so according to the New Testament?**

A: The members of the body of Christ have each been designated as priests, replacing the Levitical priesthood and therefore doing spiritually what was originally taught physically.

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you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5

**Application:** As His priests we are to present “spiritual sacrifices” to God, the first sacrifice each day being our body, mind, and will in total surrender to Him.

**[Read v.3-8]**

<sup>3</sup>For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. <sup>4</sup>For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. <sup>6</sup>Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; <sup>7</sup>if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; <sup>8</sup>or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

**Q: To place this in proper context, is Paul referring to just the whole, entire, worldwide church, or the local congregation which we call our “church”?**

A: Aspects definitely apply to both, but we should keep in mind that of the 100+ references in the New Testament to the church that most of them refer to the local congregation of believers. This is important to keep in mind in order to apply this teaching properly to our own life and ministry.

**Q: So service in the local body begins with personal dedication (v.1-2) and continues with what next step?**

A: According to v.3, it’s an honest evaluation of the spiritual gifts one possesses.

**Point:** Paul doesn’t tell us to never think of ourselves at all, but “not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think”, than what our spiritual gifts warrant.

**Q: How are spiritual gifts revealed on a practical level?**

A: While in certain instances there may be a personal revelation by God, the most common revelation comes by using the gifts in the local assembly. If someone is called to be a pastor, God will reveal it as he uses that gift in the course of building up the body.

**Q: How are spiritual gifts exercised on a practical level? How are they put into practice?**

A: According to v.3 by “a measure of faith” combined with v.6 “according to the grace given to us”. Just as salvation comes “by faith through grace” (Eph. 2:8-9), so does the exercising of our spiritual gifts.

**Q: Paul gives an example of seven ministries. What are they and how are they specifically defined?**

1. **Prophecy.** “But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.” (1 Cor. 14:3)
2. **Service.** The word literally means “deaconing” (serving) and may refer to that particular office.
3. **Teaching.** “You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim. 2:1-2)
4. **Exhortation.** The encouraging of people to serve the Lord and remain faithful to Him.
5. **Giving.** Which should be done in singleness of heart out of pure motives, not like the bad example of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5)
6. **Leadership.** Pertaining to the government of the local church. (1 Tim. 3:4, 12)
7. **Showing Mercy.** A biblical term describing sharing with those in need.

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**Q; What do all these examples have in common where service to God is concerned?**

A: Trick question. They're all 100% focused on different aspects of loving and serving **each other**. Service to God is expressed by our love for one another, for the building up of the body, not forsaking others to go "serve" him in some isolated place away from people.

**Application:** *The Christian who daily lives a crucified and dedicated life to Christ alone reveals God's will through the gifts given them by their implementation to build up the body and to love others.*

<sup>9</sup>Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup>Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; <sup>11</sup>not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; <sup>12</sup>rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, <sup>13</sup>contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

**[Read v.9-13]**

**Q: Paul elevates the teaching to a very personal level. Whereas in previous verses he is describing someone as a member of the body of Christ, to what is he alluding that we're all members of here?**

A: We're all members of a family.

**Q: What are the characteristics which identify a member of the family of God, properly committed to Christ both personally and to the church corporately?**

1. Love is to be honest and without hypocrisy. "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." (1 Jn. 3:18)
2. We should hate evil and "cling to what is good". (Prov. 97:10)
3. Love should lead to honoring one another and fervency in spiritual things. ("Fervent" literally means "boiling, aglow with power").
4. The action verbs of "rejoicing", "persevering", "devoted", "contributing", and "practicing" all connect in parallel our spiritual service to God with our service in love to one another.
5. Note how these characteristics parallel the fruit of the Spirit described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

*Galatians 5:22-23*

**Q: How does Paul extend our love for others beyond the confines of just the boundaries of the church?**

A: The reference to "practicing hospitality" refers to people of the Ancient World treated strangers. (Remember Lot at the gate?)

**Application:** *What kind of member of God's family are you? To what degree do these attributes exist in you personally or might be found to be lacking? Do you realize it's not biblical to claim possession of God's gifts and calling if these practical characteristics are not also present?*

<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. <sup>17</sup>Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. <sup>18</sup>If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. <sup>19</sup>Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," SAYS THE LORD. <sup>20</sup>"BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD." <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

## **[Read v.14-21]**

**Q: Whereas Paul first describes a true member of the body followed by a member of the family, what does he seem to be describing here?**

A: He doesn't use the word, but it's the actions and characteristics associated with a spiritual soldier in battle.

**Q: How are we supposed to respond to outright and obvious enemies?**

A: "Bless and do not curse" (v.14) and "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone" (v.17) and "Never take your own revenge" (v.19). We are to "overcome evil with good". (v.21) This is how we tangibly express true, Christ-like love for our enemies.

**Q: And how are we supposed to respond to those within the church?**

A:: We should have sympathy (v.15) and humility (v.16) because selfishness and pride generates ill will.

**Q: What is the practical application of "respect what is right in the sight of all men"?**

A: It suggest that Christians live as if in a "glass house", aware of the scrutiny of others. People are watching us and, as much as possible, we should live peaceably with everyone.

*For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.*

*Romans 14:7-8*

**Q: So how do these concluding verses fit with the opening verses of this chapter?**

A: For the believer who has turned himself over to the Lord, the Lord will take care of him and help him fight his battles. The ultimate proof of our transformation is a heart, mind, and will devoted to love determined to "overcome evil with good" both within the church and without.

## **Overall Application**

*It's very interesting that whenever we first bring up the question, "What is God's will for my life?", that it almost always involves some kind of major milestone or decision point such as "What profession should I pursue?", "Whom should I marry?", "Where should I live?", and so on. However, Paul answers that question by revealing it is to serve God exclusively by building up His body and loving others, even strangers and enemies. The fact is that if we live according to this daily sacrifice of our body, mind, and will, all the "big" things will fall into place as we are transformed into the image and likeness of Christ in the process. His will is to love others that all other things will assume their rightful place.*