

How should God's people live? Chapter 12 begins the fourth section of this letter of Paul. And it is about ethics. I like to think what is at stake in Christian ethics is that every bit of ourselves, bodies and minds, is given for the sake of others, because Jesus gave himself, body and mind, for our sakes. It is not only that our thoughts and intentions are important, but also our actions. God not only forgives and makes right what we think, but also what we have done. And these two phrases, "renewing the mind" and "presenting the body as a living sacrifice" describe the giving of ourselves. The body, which means we are not dealing in abstractions, but real, physical deeds, and real, physical people; we are talking about personal interactions with others, face to face, hand to hand; and we are talking about God who became flesh- Christ's body- which makes our bodies important; and we are talking about what we do with them, do we abuse our bodies or treat them like temples of the Holy Spirit; and we are talking about what makes the bodies of other people important, their desires and needs; and how we relate to those people and how we present our bodies, ourselves, to help those whose bodies suffer and hunger. "Present your bodies as living sacrifices," the scripture tells us,

and let us remember that the bodies of others, and their hurt and their joy, are as important as our own.

Renewing our minds is part of that living sacrifice. Renewing, doesn't that mean keeping the mind open, keeping it fresh and alert to hear the words of God and the cries of others? And doesn't it mean maintaining right thinking- that we need to understand our abilities. Don't think too highly of oneself, verse 3, that is, learn the truth: that none of us is a super-hero, but each of us has some ability that can build up the community of faith. So, self-knowledge is one aspect of renewing the mind. And humility is another: that the one gift God has given me is no greater than anyone else's. It is merely different. We are equal brothers and sisters, members of one another, and all our gifts are needed.

We present ourselves, minds and bodies, to Lord Jesus as living sacrifices. We cannot keep ourselves for ourselves; the world is too strong and would overpower and possess us. But we present ourselves to the God who makes alive and builds up and joins himself to us. And so, in just this way, we participate in the work of God: as he abides with us.

If this passage is about how we give our bodies and minds for the glory of God and for the sake of one another, then we should realize that this is not a matter

of force of will, that the mind overcomes the body's inertia to make it do what we want; nor is it doing something until it feels right or becomes habit, so that our bodies overcome the mind's lethargy, but rather that God's grace motivates and undergirds and supports and strengthens our bodies and our minds. And we come to him with gratitude.

The exhortation to ethical living is contingent upon what God has done. Notice that it is by God's mercies that we may present our bodies, verse 1; notice that God gives to each of us the "measure of faith," verse 3; notice that all of us together make up one body in Christ, verse 5; and that we possess different gifts by the grace God gives, verse 6. If these final chapters of Romans are merely commandments, then we must obey the laws of a perhaps loving dictator; but if God's mercies call us to take part in his acts of grace, then we see a God who takes part in our acts of sacrifice and renewal, and who participates in the body of fellowship with us. Chapter 5, verse 1 tells us, "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Not just peace instead of war, but closeness and instead of division, understanding and relationship and not separation. So then, ethics flows out of God's mercy upon us and his intimate fellowship with each of us, so that we are bound together as one

body, seeking the best for one another; with a sense of gratitude for what God has done and still is doing.

Want to achieve unity in the church? Let us maintain this attitude of thankfulness, and understand that these ethical teachings are not commandments that condemn us, but rules of love that we may freely adhere to in devotion to God, as believers of the living Christ, and as members of one another.

As we read this scripture, we may want to ask, “How can presenting our bodies be a spiritual worship?” When we think spiritual, aren’t we more likely to think about holiness and purity, and heart and thoughts and soul, something inner rather than outward? Perhaps we would do better to think that *spirit has to do with our relationship with God who is Spirit, and not ourselves as spiritual beings*. So that our relation to God is displayed in the things that we do.

Probably no one ever really accomplished anything just by thinking about it. Lunch doesn’t get prepared by imagining it already done; the sermon doesn’t get written just by thinking positive thoughts about it. (I’ve tried!) I don’t want to discount the importance of a positive attitude or the hidden abilities of our minds, but I think more along the lines of Thomas Edison who said, “Genius is 99 percent

perspiration and 1 percent inspiration”; and Woody Allen, who wrote that, “80 percent of success is just showing up.” That is, that what we do in our bodies is the significant thing. Our scripture says for us to “present out bodies as living sacrifices, our spiritual worship.” And it seems to mean this: that we can talk all we want and think all day long, but following Jesus is a matter of putting one foot in front of another, making hands and backs and muscles ready for labor in God’s Kingdom, presenting our bodies, the skills and even the needs of our bodies, at the altar, where God may take them and use them for others.