

We are now in the last major section of the book of Romans. Because Paul up to this point has shown us how we are saved. We are not saved by our works. We're not saved by who we are. We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone. But being saved by faith changes us. It changes how we live. It transforms the way that we act and the way that we think, so that we are no longer like the world. And Paul in this chapter of Romans shows us this, and he also gives us examples of what it means.

So he begins, then, in verse 1 of our reading: "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God." Now, it's important for us to say that right at the start, because we need to see that we can only live as Christians through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I know that might sound a little odd, or maybe even a little obvious, but it's something that we are tempted to forget all too often. Because we may be tempted to think that our lives are the reason why God loves us, that our lives as Christians, the way that we live as Christians, makes God love us or love us more than he did before. That we put our lives first and the Gospel second. But that has it backwards. It's the other way around. The Gospel comes first and our lives flow out from that. We live as we do because of Jesus Christ. And we also may be tempted to think, or at least some people may be tempted to think, that just living a generally good life is good enough. That as long as we are decent people, that will somehow make us favorable in the eyes of God. Yeah, maybe we don't go to church as often as we should. Maybe we don't pray as often as we should, but we're good people, right? Surely that must count for something. But that's setting aside the Gospel. We are who we are because of what Jesus has done for us, and apart from him, our lives are not pleasing to him. So we need to keep both of these things in mind. We cannot change the order around or set it aside. We live as Christians by the mercies of God.

But Paul goes on to say in verse 1: "To present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." So how we live as Christians, then, is a living sacrifice. It is spiritual worship. Because being a Christian is not about just saying all the right things. It's not just about having the right ideas. Being a Christian is also something that changes our lives, how we live in the body, how we live as Christians. Because if I'm only a Christian in my words, then I'm not a Christian at all. Both of these things go together: both how we think and how we live in the body.

And when we live as Christians in the body, then our lives become a kind of sacrifice offered to God. We are made priests through Jesus Christ. And that's important because, you may remember, in the Old Testament there were two kinds of sacrifice. One was a sacrifice offered for sin, and the other was a sacrifice offered as a thanksgiving to God. Sacrifice offered for sin always came with blood, because without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. But these kinds of sacrifices came to an end in Jesus Christ, because when he died on the cross and shed his own blood, our sins have been forgiven forever. Sacrificed once for all for all sin. There's no need to repeat it anymore. But the sacrifices offered for thanksgiving was always in response to something God had done. And so they would offer up things like grain or salt as a way of saying thank you to the Lord. Like if there was a good harvest, for example, or whatever they got that year, they would give some of it back as a thank offering to the Lord. Those kind of sacrifices continue. We give them too. But now we don't give grain and salt and that sort of thing. We give our lives as Christians. When we live as the Christians that we are called to be,

our lives become worship in everything that we say and do. We give glory to God through how we live.

But how does thinking of your life as a kind of worship change how you think about it, Christians? Because I know we tend to think of worship as what we're doing right now when we gather together as the Church to worship on Wednesday or Sunday or whenever it may be. That's what we usually think of as worship. And that's certainly part of it. We don't want to give that up by any means. Being a Christian means that Christ has commanded us to gather together, to worship together as the Church. It's very important. But it's not the only kind of worship. Everything that we do as a Christian is also worshiping the Lord. So when, for example, I pray to him or I read my Bible, I am worshiping the Lord. Or when I go to work in Christ's name, I am worshiping the Lord. When I take care of my family, providing for them, or even taking care of those around me, I am worshiping the Lord. So that both in the big things and the little things of life, when we do them as Christians, it becomes our spiritual worship. And others will be able to see that we are Christians even in the simplest things of life. All of life as Christians glorifies the Lord.

But this only happens, Christians, when we live like God. When we live like the world, then we are in danger of falling away. This is why Paul goes on to say in verse 2: "Do not be conformed to this world." The picture that he's using here is of making a copy of something, like if I had a statue and I wanted to make a copy of it. I would take some material, and I would shape it, and I would try to make it to look like the other thing. To copy it and to conform it in that way. And honestly, Christians, our lives will be a copy of something. The question is: of what? Are we a copy of the world, or are we a copy of God? So we need to ask ourselves some questions. Do I act like the world, or do I act like God? Do I think like the world, or do I think like God? Would anyone be able to tell that I am a Christian if I didn't tell them that I was? In other words, am I more like the world, or am I more like God?

How do we know the answer to that question? How can we determine that at all? Paul says: "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." So to answer the question, Paul points us to our minds, to how we think, so that by thinking we can test ourselves. Paul does not point us to our feelings, if I really feel like I'm a Christian. I really feel like I'm following after God. That's not what we are called to do. We are called to think, Christians. Because being a Christian doesn't mean shutting off your mind as soon as you walk in the church door, only to turn it on again once you leave. Being a Christian is a matter of the mind. By thinking and testing ourselves, we can determine if we are more like the world or more like God.

But, of course, at this point, we have to be careful, because the world also wants to shape us. The world also wants to make us think the way that it does, to tell us this is acceptable and this isn't. And this happens these days mostly through the media, through TV, the Internet, whatever it may be. All of these ideas constantly coming at us, trying to get us to think in certain ways. And when we don't spend a lot of time in God's Word, but spent a lot more time in these other things, we shouldn't be surprised if we find ourselves thinking like the world. Because thinking as a Christian is not just something that I do for an hour on Sunday morning.

So let's use some examples. The world may try to convince you that being nice is the most important thing, that we should just get along with each other, that we shouldn't cause a fuss, that we should all just go along to get along, then everything will be better. Even saying that being a Christian means that we are not judging one another, at least in the way that the world means by judging. How does that fit with Jesus, who flipped over tables and drove out the moneychangers from the temple? That doesn't seem to be very nice at all. So in reality, Christians, being a Christian is not about being nice, it's about listening to God and following after him and doing what he wants us to do, even when the world doesn't think it's very nice.

Or to use another example. The world wants us to keep a very sharp division between what we believe and what we do in the rest of life. There should be this very sharp division between the Church and the rest of society. But when we do that, it often means that we should just keep religion as something personal, something very private. We don't want to be thought of as pushy. We don't want to make it seem like we're trying to force someone else to believe something. Just keep it to yourself. It has no place in the rest of society. But in reality, Christians, following Christ means that we are Christians in everything. It means that we follow after him in all parts of our life. Jesus is not just one little tiny box in this greater thing we call our lives. We need to follow after Christ in all parts of life: in church, in our work, in politics, whatever it may be. Because we are Christians, called to follow after God.

Or to use one last example. The world often wants to say that something is right and something is wrong, even to change what that means over time. A lot of what we're seeing now these days. But even if all the world says that something is right when God says that it's wrong, it's still wrong, because what God says is true. God is the truth, and he is the one who determines right and wrong. So we need to listen to him above all things.

So in this way, Christians, we need to shape our thinking according to God's Word and not be shaped by the world. And even be willing to change our thinking if it goes against God's Word, because God ultimately wants what is good for us. The world's only seeking after what will destroy it. So Paul calls for us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds so that we think like God in everything, and in that way we will be able to test if we are more like the world or more like God.

And just so we have some examples of this, Paul gives a few in the rest of this chapter. He goes on to show us what it means to think like a Christian, so we have something to test ourselves by. So first of all, he says, we live as Christians with one another. We are, after all, one body in Jesus Christ. We are one mind in him. We are not called to be selfish. We're not called to think that we don't need each other, because we absolutely do. But rather we are called to use what we have been given in the service of each other, so that we're all built up together. That's who we are called to be as the Church of God.

But we can also see other ways of what it means to think like a Christian. We are called to turn away from what is evil, to love one another as brothers in the faith, to be patient even in the midst of our suffering, to give to our fellow Christians who are in any kind of need, to associate with the lowly, those that we consider to be beneath us, and never to seek revenge, but to put everything in the hands of God. These things and many others that Paul gives to us show us what

it means to have the mind of God, shows us what it means to think like him. And if we find that we're lacking in any of these, that we don't quite measure up to what it means to think like God, then we can confess our sins, and in that way be conformed to him more and more. To be shaped by his Word so that we think with the mind of God.

So therefore, Christians, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Do not think like the world, but think like God, because in this way, your lives will become worship through what you say and do each and every day. Because God has made you holy, Christians, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to yourself through Jesus Christ, your Son. Help us always to be conformed to him so that we may think as you think and live as you would have us live, to be the Christians that you have created us to be. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.