



What God Wants from You

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Have you ever wondered what God wants from you?

I don't mean wondering for a few minutes and then coming up with a quick list of do's and don'ts like go to church, give money, read the Bible, pray, do good works, help the needy, and don't commit any of the really bad sins like adultery or murder.

No, I mean seriously and prayerfully seeking God, and asking, "What do You want of me? How do I live the new life You have given me? How do I please and serve You?" This is one of the most important questions a believer can ask after coming to salvation. What a tragedy it would be to go through life ignorant and heedless of what God wants from you and then have to face Him at the judgment, having failed to fulfill His purposes in your life. Because of generations of inadequate preaching of the gospel and decreased personal study of Scripture, many in the church appear to be in that situation today. What about you? Have you ever personally grappled with this question in the Word of God and prayer and discovered an answer?

The answer is not a secret. It can be found repeatedly in the Bible, but the apostle Paul makes it exceptionally clear and direct: "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" (Rom. 12:1).¹ Ideally we do this when we first come to Christ, as Paul did. But Paul is making this appeal to believers, indicating that at least some of the believers in the church at Rome had not made this commitment. The weakness, worldliness, and compromise in the American church today is clear evidence that most believers have not done so.

That's the bad news. The good news is that some have, and *everyone* may and should. Those who do make the commitment experience the best of life with God. And this verse is a vital key. Throughout the centuries it has had a profound, life-changing effect on those who have understood and embraced it. As we dig into its meaning and implications, you will see why.



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But first, let's note the context. Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome in about A.D. 55, twenty-some years after the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem. Some of the converts that day were "visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes" (Acts 2:10-11). Perhaps they returned to Rome and became the firstfruits of the Roman church, or maybe it was founded through traveling merchants or evangelists. We don't know for sure. In any case, it appears to have been in existence for some time before Paul wrote his letter. How well they understood the basics of the faith at this point is unclear. What *is* clear is that Paul wanted to lay the foundations they needed to be well grounded in a relationship with Christ and to live a Christ-centered life. Let's look briefly at why Paul wrote Romans 12:1 and how it applies to us today.

For Paul this exhortation is an extremely important matter. The Greek word for "appeal" is not simply a request; it is an urgent exhortation, only one step short of a command. The heart of Paul's concern here begins in

Romans 6: he challenged all those who had come into union with Christ to faithfully live the new life they had received. Or to put it differently, everyone who had become a *new creation* in Christ was now to live as a *new creature* in Christ. Because he knew human nature and the spiritual life very well, Paul knew that some in the Roman church had not yet given themselves fully to God; others had done so but then reasserted their own control. Knowing that the new life does not mature apart from acts of our will, he emphasized the urgency of making a decisive personal choice in this matter, either to make a wholehearted surrender to God or to reaffirm one made earlier.

Unfortunately in the past century many well-meaning believers have seen this text as something akin to the U.S. Army appealing to its regular troops for volunteers for the special forces. I say “unfortunate” because such a view gives the impression that Paul is calling believers to an optional, higher level of commitment. But this clearly is *not* a call to a special, higher level of commitment, service, or heroic sacrifice, as the text itself shows. Paul explicitly says that presenting our bodies as “a living sacrifice” is our “spiritual service of worship.” That is, it is the normal, rational, Spirit-led worship that every believer is bound to offer to the God who so loved us that He gave His only Son to redeem us. Although this wholehearted giving of ourselves to God will seem extreme to many in the church today, this is only because we have lived subnormally (from the gospel’s perspective) for so long that when we see the “true normal” it looks abnormal in comparison.

What does it mean to present your body as a living sacrifice to God? The imagery is drawn from the practice of animal sacrifice, where the central idea is that of a worshipper presenting an animal to God as a sacrifice to be slaughtered. Once presented, the animal no longer belonged to the worshipper but entirely and completely to God. Just as a sacrificial animal belonged wholly and irrevocably to God, Paul says true worshippers of God are to present and devote their bodies wholly and irrevocably to God as a *living* sacrifice. By this, he means not just our bodies but devoting our entire selves to God. As John Calvin observes, “By bodies, he does not mean only our skin and bones, but the totality of which we are composed . . . for the members of our bodies are the instruments by which we perform our actions.”²

What does this entail? Paul made it clear earlier in Romans when he said: “Do not present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been

brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness” (Rom. 6:13). We are to present our entire selves, which includes our “members.” By “members” he meant the members of our bodies—our hands and feet, eyes, ears, lips, etc. They are the instruments through which we express ourselves in deeds of either good or evil. Thus, in concrete terms, when we present our bodies to God as living sacrifices, we cease to use our members for sin and begin to use them for godliness. We choose to no longer look with *our eyes* at lustful images but rather at things that are wholesome; to no longer listen with *our ears* to dirty jokes, evil speaking, etc., but rather to things that are edifying; to no longer use *our tongues* to criticize, tell lies, gossip or slander but rather to speak wise, truthful words that bless people and to share the gospel; to no longer use *our private parts* to have illicit sex but to be chaste; to use *our hands* to work and to serve; to no longer sit around in selfish ease but rise to *our feet* and get up and out in service to God and neighbor (Rom. 6:17).

A specific example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 6:18–20, where a member of the church was involved in sexual sin: Paul said: “Flee from sexual immorality . . . Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” Or as Paul said elsewhere, “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Surrendering ourselves fully to God is an essential key to how we “glorify God and enjoy Him forever,” to quote the Westminster shorter catechism. It isn’t in some act of heroism or great sacrifice; those are few and far between. Rather, it is in choosing each day to use the members of our bodies as befits children of God, new creatures in Christ, members of the kingdom of God. And this is possible through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Why do so few people in the church fully surrender to God?

Why do so few people in the church seem to live this way? Some in the church are not truly saved, do not love God, and therefore have no interest in submitting to Him. But that is only one part of the problem. Others are saved but have not been taught that they are called to full surrender to God. Still others do know but are fearful of what it might cost; they avoid even thinking about it. Finally, there are those who

have heard and accepted the call to full surrender but for some reason have relapsed, gotten off track, and taken back the control of their lives. As D.L. Moody observed, “The problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar.”

How people react to this call depends on where their hearts are. The idea of a total, absolute, and irrevocable surrender of our whole selves to God will come as a shock to those who have never heard or read about it. Others, who want to exempt certain areas of their life from God’s control, will see it as an unwelcome and unreasonable intrusion upon their freedom. Still others will see it as an impossible ideal not meant to be taken literally; “after all,” they reason, “God made us and knows how weak we are.” But those who truly know God will hear His voice through Paul’s words and will not refuse Him or rationalize away His call. They will desire to be entirely His, even as they recognize their own weakness and inability to live up to His call perfectly.

You may be wondering if such a surrender is really necessary. Yes, it is. Why? Before entering God’s kingdom, we were rebels against God and pursued a life of autonomy, which was manifested in the various sins that characterized our life. To repent of our sins and trust Christ is in effect to end our rebellion, lay down our arms, and come under God’s reign. C.S. Lewis put it well,

*Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realising that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor—that is the only way out of our ‘hole.’ This process of surrender—this movement full speed astern—is what Christians call repentance.*³

To reserve the right to run certain areas of our lives as we see fit is really to carry our old attitude of rebellion into our new lives, thereby rejecting one of the most basic principles of kingdom life. Surrender is the concrete, ongoing expression of repentant faith and union with Christ; it is the fruit of a converted heart and the basic attitude and posture of a child of God toward his or her heavenly Father. Surrender and obedience are critical!

How is such a life possible? Through an event, followed by a process. The Greek text here clearly means we must make a definite, decisive, absolute surrender to God (Rom. 12:1). The Amplified Bible captures it

well: “make a decisive dedication of your bodies—presenting all your members and faculties—as a living sacrifice, holy (devoted, consecrated) and well pleasing to God.” This is the event, it is something we do at a specific point in time. It is an act of the will, not a feeling or sentiment. It is a settled determination to give ourselves wholly to God; to be His, and His alone, and to do His will, no matter the cost, for the rest of our lives. We are henceforth His and no longer our own. He doesn’t want a truce or armistice; He wants unconditional surrender.

Ideally we do this at the time of conversion, like Paul, though ignorance or resistance can cause a delay. In any case, the flesh will resist this, and the devil will use every trick in the book to prevent it. He will whisper in your ear phrases such as *Are you crazy? You will become a religious fanatic. You will lose your reputation. You could lose your job and career. Your friends will abandon you. You could lose your marriage. This could cost you your life.* And these are only a few. He will bring before your mind the things you fear most and tell you that God will require them of you if you surrender to Him. *God will send you to Africa as a missionary. He will call you to marry an unattractive spouse. Or to live in an unfulfilling or unhappy marriage. Or to live in poverty.* And on it goes.

What the devil will *not* tell you is the truth: that you are surrendering into the arms of love, the arms of a loving Father in heaven who redeemed you at great cost, who knows what is best for your life, and who only wants to do you good. You are surrendering to God’s all-wise purposes for your life, which will bring you ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment in life and the greatest glory to God.

Making this surrender, doesn’t mean that we promise henceforth live a perfect life. Nor does it mean that we will not sometimes stumble into sin or grow weak in our commitment or even relapse to self-management. Rather, it means that we make a fundamental commitment to take God’s side in a lifelong, relentless warfare against our sins in the pursuit of holiness. It means that in our hearts we “will to do His will” and desire to be transformed into Christlikeness. It means that we give as much of ourselves as we are aware of at the time to God, and let him expand that awareness as life unfolds. It means that in our weakness, we depend on His strength and daily seek to be filled afresh with His Spirit and obey His word. And it means that when we stumble and sin, we turn at once to our Father in confession and repentance to receive His loving pardon. Like a ragged little street urchin who has been adopted by a childless king, we know from whence we

have come and what a mess we still are. We also know that He wants to clean up our mess, and we want to cooperate and do whatever it takes to please Him and become like Jesus.

God's Goal for Us

The event of surrender is followed by the process of transformation, and this brings us to the heart of Paul's concern in these verses. Surrender is not an end in itself but is the means to a much greater end. For God's ultimate goal is not simply the forgiveness of our sins or even the improvement of our moral life; it is the transformation of our lives into the very image of Christ. Phrased differently, it is the restoration of God's image in us, which was disfigured at the Fall.

The word Paul uses for *transform* is the same word translated "transfigure" in the Gospels to describe the change that Jesus experienced on the mount (Luke 9:28–36). The process begins on earth and ends in heaven, but we are called to make as much progress as we can while still alive.

Transformation into Christ's image is not an easy matter, nor is it quick. Paul knew that all people have been shaped and powerfully influenced by the values, attitudes, desires, and behaviors of the fallen world—that every human being is in a process of "spiritual formation." The only question is which spirit is doing the forming: the spirit of the world or the Spirit of God? He also knew that coming to faith in Jesus, though it changes the human heart in a fundamental way, doesn't produce instant perfection. Because the pressures to conform to the world's ways is very powerful, Paul exhorts the Romans to do two things. First, "Do not be conformed to this world," (Rom. 12:2), or as the Phillips paraphrase puts it, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold." The idea is to stop allowing yourself to be formed and shaped by the spirit and behaviors of the fallen world. This means that we identify and forsake worldly ways of thinking and behaving. Second, Paul says, "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind," that is, "Let God remold your minds from within" (PHILLIPS). The passive voice here reminds us that it is ultimately God who changes us; we cannot do it in our unaided strength. As Paul said earlier, it is by the Spirit that we put to death the works of the body (Rom. 8:13).

Type A's and perfectionists must be careful here that they don't get discouraged and give up because they can't achieve 100% in this life. Like everyone, they must aim high and be earnest while realizing that perfection doesn't come until we reach heaven. But mean-

ingful progress here is possible and vitally important for God's glory, for us personally and for our rewards in the world to come. The Holy Spirit brings this transformation chiefly through the Word He inspired—the Bible. The more we learn of the Word under the Spirit's teaching, the more we will see God's truth, understand His will, learn His ways, and thereby recognize and forsake remaining sin in our lives. Active fellowship and regular attendance in a church that preaches and teaches the Bible as the Word of God is essential.

Romans 12:2 reinforces the fact that total surrender to God is just the beginning of a lifelong process of putting off the world's ways, putting to death the deeds of the body, and being transformed into the likeness of Christ through the power of the Spirit. It also helps explain why some believers who have been truly converted but are not fully committed experience so much defeat and so little change. They have their feet in two worlds. They are trying to have it both ways. They have too much of the world in them to enjoy God and too much of God to enjoy the world.

Is that you, or someone you know? Whether from ignorance, misguided teaching, fear of trusting God, or rebelliousness, the way we break out of this bondage into the abundant life with Christ is to present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice and let Him lead us from there.

Our Motivation for Surrender to God

What on earth could motivate someone to make such a surrender? Paul gives us the answer when he says, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by *the mercies of God*." The mercies of God are the loving kindness and compassion of God that Paul has been describing in the preceding eleven chapters: God's mercies in sending His Son to die for our sins, in drawing us to Himself, in forgiving our sins, in giving us eternal life, in giving us His Spirit. And this really takes us to the heart of the matter. True Christianity, as William Barclay once said, "does not think of a man as finally submitting to the power of God; it thinks of him as finally surrendering to the love of God. It is not that man's will is crushed, but that man's heart is broken." When we grasp God's great love for us *personally*, seen in the mercies of God, especially in the cross of Christ, it changes something within us. It produces "an answering love," and this answering love is grateful and desires to please the Beloved. We experience in increasing measure what Thomas Chalmers called "the

expulsive power of a new affection" which displaces the love of self that dominates our hearts with love for God. Thus surrender and obedience become willing and not compelled. We no longer think in terms of "I *have* to obey God" but of "I *want* to obey God." And all of this is the work of the Spirit of God in our hearts.

Surrendering to God may be likened to marriage. A marriage begins with the wedding, in which two people who love each other, "forsaking all others," commit themselves to one another, "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part." That is the beginning of a relationship that is full of hope and promise. But as time passes, the relationship will be tested by temptations, trials, and challenges. Each person will have to die a thousand little deaths to self along the way and be sustained at points not by feelings but by a commitment. But as the husband and wife remain faithful to that commitment, they will experience increasing transformation and joy as the two become one, not in word only but in heart and mind.

The life that is consecrated to God is like that. It is an exclusive, committed relationship with Someone who loves us with an everlasting love and will be faithful to us until our life's end. It is a life of love, joy, peace, and much fruitfulness amid the temptations, trials, and tribulations of this present world. It is also a life of progressive inner transformation,

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16–18)

Such a life glorifies God and will be blessed by Christ when He returns to judge our works and distribute our rewards in the world to come.

What about those who refuse to surrender themselves to God? In this world their lives become increasingly dominated by the spirit of the world, and they do not grow to maturity or fulfill His purposes for them. They also become easy prey for the devil and his schemes and may become an embarrassment to Christ. At the judgment they face a dreadful day of reckoning. The apostle Paul said of the Lord, "We make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive

what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:9–10).

If even the great apostle of grace looked to the day of judgment with sobriety, it must be a very serious matter indeed for those who have been unfaithful to Christ. The purpose of this judgment will not be to determine our salvation but to evaluate our faithfulness in this life and our rewards in the next. What a tragedy it will be for believers who have not surrendered to God and lived for His glory but lived for themselves and been formed by the spirit of the world. But what a joy for those who can look into the eyes of Jesus without fear, who have eagerly awaited His coming because they loved Him, who have found perfect freedom in giving themselves to Him and His service and who delight to be with Him forever.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.
2. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Epistles to the Romans and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 264.
3. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 56.
4. William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 23.
5. Thomas Chalmers, a sermon titled "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," <http://www.christianity.com/christian-life/spiritual-growth/the-expulsive-power-of-a-new-affection-11627257.html>.

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Discipleship of Heart and Mind

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