

PASTORAL PRAYER

Merciful God, God who overlooks our short fallings and loves us all the same, this is the day to Sabbath. This is the day to set all things aside, to not be productive but to be focused on living fully. This is the day to come and be with you in heart, mind, and soul. This is the day to worship with song, word, and action. As we want to do these things well, we seek to be open to you. We give you our cares, concerns, all on our hearts. Hear our prayers and guide us toward what matters, what will keep us fully attuned to you and your ways, showing us how to be the best agents of your love and care today and always.

As you are merciful, God, you call us to be mercy. We seek to learn that difficult and life-long task: to give you our whole selves. We find ourselves easily wrapped up in our own agendas, keeping tabs on the offenses of others, looking to see others slip up and to laugh at their misfortune, but this is not your way. This is no holy sacrifice. Because you were merciful to us, you call us to be mercy to the world. Help us in the easy times, the difficult times, and all times in between to live grace to a graceless world, to show mercy to a world that counts, and to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice in the fullness of a heart devoted to worship. We pray these things all in the name of the Lord of mercy to all, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

Have you heard the story of Jim Joyce? He was a nondescript man, going about his job, until one evening in 2010, he made an error...a pretty big error, that cost one man a chance at history. Jim Joyce is a Major League Baseball Umpire. On June 2, 2010, he was the first base umpire for a matchup between the Detroit Tigers and Cleveland. A young pitcher named Armando Galarraga took the mound for the Tigers. Galarraga kept retiring

Cleveland batters. He put down twenty-six batters without letting one reach base into the ninth. The final batter of the inning was Jason Donald. Donald hit a pitch that went to first baseman Miguel Cabrera, who tossed it to Galarraga, covering first base. Galarraga caught the ball and touched the base. The Tigers celebrated a perfect game when Jim Joyce called Donald safe. The joy fizzled. Complaints ensued, and Detroit Manager Jim Leyland raised a ruckus, but the call stood. Galarraga's chance at a perfect game, not to mention a no-hitter, was gone. The Tigers got the final out and prevailed, but there was no joy in victory. Instant replays showed clearly Donald was out. Of course, if you were a Tigers fan, not to mention the players or Armando Galarraga, you'd be infuriated. Who wouldn't be? He would have been just the 21st pitcher to throw a Major League Perfect Game. Considering Major League Baseball's history, that's an amazing feat. It was completely unfair, but the story's not over. What was a defiant Jim Joyce on the field watched the replay after the game. His post-game interview was contrite. Joyce confessed he stole history from Armando Galarraga. Before the game the following day, a tearful Jim Joyce and Armando Galarraga shook hands at home plate before sharing lineups. When there could have been revenge in Armando Galarraga's heart, he offered forgiveness. He sacrificed his wants and desires, focusing instead on mercy, and was transformed.

While Romans is the first of the Epistles, the letters to the churches, it probably should be the last. After all, it was the final letter Paul wrote, and it serves as his complete formula of theology. In a way, it serves as his faith dissertation. He explains everything he's learned in years of service and evangelism for the first eleven chapters. Then, the tone shifts. When you get to chapter 12, according to the podcast Sermon Brainwave, you get to the "so what?" part of the book. It goes from knowledge to application. The first part is

especially integral, for it sets the tone for the phrases to come. There is so much to dissect here, but let's focus on the first two verses of Romans 12. Let's look at the idea of "Living Sacrifice" and how that concept helps us live "The Mercies of God."

Verse 1 of chapter 12 kicks it off with a statement that shapes the rest: "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." OK, now what does that even mean? There's a lot power-packed into this little bit, so let's take it piece by piece, starting with the bottom line: "living sacrifice." The podcast Sermon Brainwave gave a pretty good analogy of "Living Sacrifice." Put simply, it's an oxymoron. It's seemingly two different ideas right next to each other. It's like Jumbo Shrimp, Genuine Cubic Zirconia, Artificial Grass, Boneless Wings, Good Loss, Organized Chaos, Congressional Ethics, Microsoft Works, Acting Naturally, Great Monday, Boneless Ribs, Smart Packer Fan. In scripture, these seemingly opposite ideas work together in "living sacrifice." Our God is the God of the Oxymoron. Paul is using a very Jewish idea of the sacrifice to introduce the idea of what our God calls for today. The Gospel is a living Gospel, just as Christ is not dead but living. God does not call the dead; God calls the living to God's purposes. We give ourselves fully to our calling daily, to sacrifice our seemingly important desires to a greater purpose. And it means everything; when it says to "present your bodies," it's a translation of the Greek that means, "your whole self." We give all of ourselves to God and ask for God's transformative power, and we do it daily, every day we live, breathe, and work. We do this not because it's required but because it's meaningful. And, ultimately, when we present ourselves as a living sacrifice, we are truly, truly worshipping with God's approval.

Why the living sacrifice? How are we to give ourselves? Let's take a step back and do a recap. Last week on Pastor Jeff's Sermon, we talked about the difference between the Word of the Law and the Spirit of the Law. If we only live by the Word of the Law, we find that our actions have no energy behind them. Everything is about obligation and the same old thing the same old way. There's no joy there. There is only "I have to." Jesus showed that the Pharisees had lost their love, they had lost their compassion, they had lost any joy behind what they did because they focused on the Word of the Law when they turned to scripture. Jesus focused on the Spirit of the Law. When we speak of the Spirit of the Law, we go back to what was the whole point behind everything to begin with. The Spirit of the Law focuses not on the exact words and the exact phrase of what we are supposed to do but focuses on the energy behind those laws and phrases. We sacrifice not by the Word of the Law but by the Spirit of the Law. With that in mind, hear this: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..." The key phrase is "by the mercies of God." By the Word of the Law, we give ourselves to God because we have to, because it's about us, because we want to get our own butts into to heaven, because it's required of us and we do it begrudgingly. By the Spirit of the Law, we present ourselves as a living sacrifice because of God's mercy toward us and because we want to spread that mercy. Because God has been merciful with us, we are merciful to others. This means we sacrifice our agendas to deliver the love and goodness to all in the world, those who we think deserve it and those who we think do not deserve it. As Christians, we never measure another by what he or she deserves. That's a double standard when we confess that we don't deserve God's awesome grace. Because we have received mercy, we give mercy...to the deserved, undeserved, all God's creation.

Mercy in action is a living sacrifice; it helps us pick our battles, to recognize what deserves and what doesn't. Too often we react to all situations with, "This person did this wrong thing to me, so I'm gonna get them back!" Let's be honest, there are the wrongs that don't matter one lick, and then there's the crucial wrongs. I've seen a lot of the former. "You cut in front of me and stole the last piece of cake!" "You took my parking spot!" "My order isn't correct!" The stakes are usually low, but we choose to respond with anger. I mean, really? We're wasting time on these things? Mercy knows when to let it go and concentrate on the bigger issues. Our agenda is first and foremost spreading God's love. We must always ask: what is important only now, and what is truly important?

On the other hand, there are situations that require true outrage, those situations that are truly unjust. Mercy attends to the needs of those in need and hears the injustices while not thinking we know better ourselves. Just look as far as Ferguson, Missouri. Something went terribly wrong there with that young boy's death, and that is just seeing the tip of the iceberg with real injustice. It deserves a much longer and fuller discussion than just part of a sermon. Some have chosen to respond mercifully with faithful protest and caring for those people who have been hurt; some have chosen to respond with horrible and unjustifiable violence on both sides of the conflict. The point is, with God's mercy, we must be merciful to all God's creatures in response and see things as they are, what really matters. We will be that living sacrifice that cares for others first. We must consistently be merciful, in living better and recognizing how to protest true injustice.

When we live with lives devoted to God's mercy, the rest of the passage takes shape. The second verse brings out more of the idea. It's not just about what we know but how open we are to receiving the mystery of God's mercy. "Do not be conformed to this world

but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” We cannot be merciful until we grow to understand mercy throughout life. What I find interesting here is the word usage here.

Renewing, not renewal. Renewing implies process, not a one-and-done. Renewing happens over time. No matter where you are in life, you are not the same person you were a year ago, five years ago, a decade, or twenty years ago. We all change over time; we are all renewed into living well for every new age. Mercy is the same way; as we understand God’s, we understand how to live. That takes a lifetime of renewing and renewing again.

We may never be in the position of Armando Galarraga, where the chance of a lifetime slips away from us by another person’s error. However, we can choose daily to partake in the renewing of our minds, being people of God’s mercy just as God shared mercy with us. We can choose daily to be that living sacrifice with our whole beings, giving up those selfish things that taint our hearts and minds. By this sacrifice, we live in mercy: choosing the real battles and living with the mind of Christ: seeking what is good, acceptable, and perfect. Once again, it’s seeking those things that are of the Spirit of the Law, not the Word of the Law. Thanks be to God for the opportunity to learn the wisdom of living in this world faithfully and the opportunity to be the sacrifice daily. Amen and Amen.