

ROMANS

Part 23: “Spiritual Worship”

Romans 12:1–8

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Sunday, August 14, 2022 (Ordinary Time; Sending Sunday for Citylight Church)

Scripture Reading

“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. Do not be conformed to this world, 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. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness” (Romans 12:1–8).

Introduction

Have you ever wondered why most of our singing is in the latter portion of our worship services here at Redeemer?

It’s not an accident. In fact, we have designed the rhythms—or the *liturgy*—of our times of worship with the utmost intentionality. Our rhythms of worship rehearse the story of the gospel so that we might be formed by that story as we worship.

First, we begin with a call to worship because we are those who have been called together by God and constituted by the word of God. And we respond to God’s call with a song of rejoicing.

God speaks; we respond.

We then stand to acknowledge the authority and power and perfection of God’s word as we read the words of Scripture. And after the gospel is proclaimed through preaching, we respond by prayer and singing.

God speaks; we respond.

Then, we read the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23–26). And we respond by reflecting in prayer. We respond by confessing our sins and acknowledging our need for grace.

God speaks, and we respond.

But as soon as we confess our sins, we are met with the word of God's pardoning grace. God's word proclaims over us the truth that we have been justified by faith and that we now have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:1). And we respond by sharing in communion. We respond by resting in God's grace. We respond by glorifying God in yet another song of celebration and adoration.

Yet again, *God speaks, and we respond.* Have you noticed a theme?

Finally, when our time of gathering ends, we are commissioned with a word of blessing and benediction. We are sent into our city and world. And we respond to that sending by living lives of worship unto our God.

God has spoken to us, and we respond to his words by living lives that have been shaped by the gospel word as way of worshipping the glorious God who has saved us and justified us by his grace.

The rhythm of our worship in here is meant to form the pattern of our worship *out there*. Our liturgy is designed to communicate a theology of what Christian worship really is—which is a response to the gospel.

So, for the rest of our time today, as we look into the Apostle Paul's letter to the church of Rome, we will examine the nature of true and "Spiritual Worship." And we will see how the twelfth chapter of Romans shows us that true worship involves **1.) A New Way of Living, 2.) A New Way of Thinking, and 3.) A New Way of Belonging.**

Exposition

1.) A New Way of Living

Some of the earliest artifacts that archeologists have unearthed show us the pervasive desire within humanity to worship something bigger than us; something beyond us. And from continent to continent, from culture to culture, humans have sought to make sacrifices as a way to earn divine blessing and favor.

In ancient times, a farmer might sacrifice an animal, or a tribe of people might perform a rain dance to garner the approval of the god who controlled the rains and the storms.

In modern times, we might promise God that we will give more, worship more, or read our Bibles more, if he were to give us the job we want, the date we want, or the blessing we crave.

This way of viewing worship is deeply ingrained within us. We view worship as a way we scratch God's back so that he might scratch ours.

But the God that has been revealed to us is not a God of karma. He is a holy and glorious God that cannot be bought or managed by our good deeds. He is self-existent and self-sufficient. He needs nothing from us. Though we depend on him for everything, he is contingent upon nothing.

Even in the Old Testament, God reveals that he desires to be worshipped beyond the rituals of pagan sacrifice: *"I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?"* (Psalm 50:9–13).

So then, what is the worship God requires? How does God desire to be worshipped? Romans 12:1 answers that question: *"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"* (Romans 12:1).

Up until this point in Romans, Paul has been unfolding the glory of the gospel. He has unveiled the utter inadequacy of the righteousness of man and declared to us the righteousness of God. We have beheld a vision of a new way of life—free from the powers of sin and death—that is made possible only by the resurrection of Christ. We have glimpsed the mysteries of grace, salvation, divine sovereignty, and what it means to be the people of God.

It makes sense, then, that Paul will now turn his attention to how we should respond to and live in light of this glorious good news. And how should we respond to the gospel? Paul's answer should not surprise us. God has spoken his gospel word to us. Now, *we respond with worship*. God has revealed his mercy; *therefore*, we live for him!

In fact, the word *"therefore"* (οὖν) in Romans 12:1 is of the utmost importance. It shows us that Christian worship a life that is based on, rooted in, and contingent upon God's work of redemption. All of Christian life flows from this *"therefore."*

Thus, worship is not something we do to get to God. Worship is not something we do to earn the favor of God so that he might give us the blessings we want. Worship is not a rain dance we do to get God's attention. We are not the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kgs 18).

True worship—spiritual worship—is a reply of gratitude to a gift that has been given. Worship is an acknowledgment of God's glory revealed. Worship is a response—the only reasonable (λογικὴν) response—to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This means we must learn to see worship as more than going through the motions of religiosity. True worship—spiritual worship—engages us at the core of our hearts and radiates into the fabric of our daily lives.

So what is the key difference between Christian worship and the worship of the ancient pagans? Much of it boils down to motivation. We are motivated unto righteous living, not as a way to earn God's mercy. We are motivated to righteous living because we have been given God's mercy.

As Eugene Peterson has paraphrased this passage, “... *Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.*”¹

2.) A New Way of Thinking

God made the human mind, and he even directly calls his people to love him with our minds (Deut 6:5). Thus, Christian worship entails a radical reorientation of our minds toward the reality of God and the truth of his gospel.

Paul writes in verse 2: “*Do not be conformed to this world, 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*” (Rom 12:2).

Do not be conformed to this world. The word “conform” (συσχηματίζεσθε) conveys the sense of being passively shaped into a preconceived, cookie-cutter mold designed by the world.

But Paul is saying, we no longer have to be who the world expects us to be or demands that we be. We are more than workers and mean of production. We are more than consumers. We are more than members of a voting bloc or demographics for entertainment and advertisement. Those molds may be how the world sees you and defines your value. But that is not who you are.

Men and women were created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:28). By virtue of our creation, we have been granted dignity, value, and worth. True, the power of sin has fractured God's good creation and made us radically unable to live righteous by our own power.

But those who are in Christ have been liberated from the tyranny of sin. Now, the grace of God welcomes us into a mindset that is incomprehensible outside of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This mindset is far more than the mere avoidance of sin. Christ calls us to set our minds on that which is good, the true, and the beautiful.

¹ Peterson, *Message*, Rom 12:1–2.

However, to do this, we must constantly renew our minds with the truth of the gospel. As the world presses in around us, we are called to press into the truth of the gospel. The truth of God transforms our minds so that we might discern the will of God. This, too, is spiritual worship.

The Apostle Paul is showing us that the gospel simply cannot be compartmentalized in our minds. If the gospel is true, it changes the way we think about everything. The gospel changes the way we imagine reality and even understand ourselves.

If the gospel is true, the mystery of life is more than just meaningless matter in motion. If the gospel is true, then history is telling the drama of salvation; this world is the stage of God's redeeming work; our lives are vested with meaning and significance that more glorious than we could ever imagine; and the resurrected Son of God is the center of it all!

As the great Oxford Professor C.S. Lewis once said, *"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else."*

Now, the truth of the gospel does have deeply practical ramifications for how we see ourselves in relation to one another. As Paul continues in verse 3, *"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned"* (Rom 12:3).

The gospel is the announcement that God has saved us in Christ when we could not save ourselves. It is the revelation of the righteousness of God that is the power of salvation over against our desperate and cosmic need.

If this is true, then nothing could be more rationally absurd than a prideful Christian. The grace of God demands the annihilation of all forms of human pride.

By "pride," I mean all ways of thinking that center around *self*. In this way, pride can take the form of self-glorification. But pride can also take the form of self-condemnation. Nevertheless, the gospel tears down all forms of pride because it, at once, declares that no form of effort of ours is good enough to attain salvation and no sin of ours is more powerful than the cross of Jesus Christ.

Practically, this means the truth of Jesus Christ can set you free of chronic insecurity, constant comparison, judgmentalism, and the need to constantly prove yourself before others.

There is no place for arrogance among Christians, for our sin was so great that the Son of God had to give his life to atone for us. Yet, nor is there a place for hatred toward self or others, for God's love was so great that he gave his own Son for our redemption.

Sound theology begets profound humility in our thinking. And that humility is an essential part of our spiritual worship.

3.) A New Way of Belonging

Human beings are social creatures that possess a longing for community. We were created with a longing to belong to something cosmically greater than ourselves. We have a deep and abiding need to know others and be known in community. And the word of God shows us that this spiritual longing is meant to be satisfied in the worshipping community of Jesus-followers that is known as the church.

Through the church of Jesus Christ, we are able to participate in the very life of Christ. For the church is not just a gathering of people—it is the *body* (σῶμα) of Christ. Paul writes, “*For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another*” (Rom 12:4–5).

Through faith in Christ, we share a mystical sense of union with God and fellowship with one another. Through the mystery of the body of Christ, there is simultaneously oneness and diversity. There is unity without uniformity. There is a difference without dismemberment.

As we have all been saved by grace, so too we have all been gifted by grace. And as light shines and refracts differently through a prism, so too, God's grace shines differently through each of us. Yet, it is when we use those gifts of grace to encourage one another and serve one another that we find our truest sense of identity, as well as belonging.

Paul then lists several different examples of gifts of grace that operate in the life of the church: “*Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good*” (Rom 12:6–9).

Paul's list here is not exhaustive. In fact, he has different lists in other letters, which may indicate that congregations might be gifted differently, just as Christians are gifted differently (cf. 1 Cor 12:4–11; Eph 4:11). But, with that said, I think it is helpful to unpack the seven gifts that are listed in this passage. And, as I walk through this list, I would like to challenge you to ask yourself: *how does God's grace shine through you? How might he be calling you to serve your other members in the body of Christ?*

The first gift is **prophecy**. We typically think about a prophet as a mystical wizard who tells the future. But in the Bible, the role of the prophet was more related to one who was called to declare the word of God to the people of God. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul says that prophecy is meant to build-up, encourage, and comfort the church (1 Cor 14:2). In

this way, there is an aspect of the preaching ministry of the church that is meant to be prophetic. It is meant to declare who God is and who the people of God are called to be.

Service is a gift that takes a myriad of forms. In the New Testament, the words “service” and “ministry” are identical (διακονίαν; cf. Rom 11:13; 12:7). Thus, service can take the form of preparing coffee or serving communion; service can be playing music or helping children and students; making our gatherings hospitable or making our gatherings safe; helping a foster family, or mentoring a refugee. Where has God given you the desire, opportunity, and ability to serve?

Teaching is another vital gift for the church to grow in discipleship. Teachers love to understand things and then explain them to people. They love it when they learn a new idea and love it when they can lead people to a better understanding of something. They hate it when an idea is unclear. The gift of teaching helps the church to know and love God. It is hard to love God if we do not know him well. If this is you, we would love to help you become a leader of a Gospel Community or a teacher in our Kids Ministry.

The gift of **exhortation** can also be translated as “encouragement.” This gift is not flattery. It is using words of hope and kindness to help others see themselves as God sees them (παρακαλῶν is what Paul says he is doing in Rom 12:1). Exhortation imparts joy to the sorrowful and gives comfort to those who are hurting. The gift of exhortation is desperately needed throughout the body of Christ.

The gift of **contribution** or giving helps resource the church for ministry. Our congregation does not receive financial support from the government, nor do we sell anything for a profit. Our ministry is completely funded by the generosity of people who desire to see the ministry of the gospel go forth in our city, our region, and throughout the world. The gift of generosity is meant to be motivated from a place of “cheerfulness,” not obligation (2 Cor 9:7). Simply said, we give to support the church because Christ has been given to us, and we want others to know the hope only he can give.

Leadership is easy to notice when it is overly weak or overly domineering. But it is often hidden when it is blessing the church the most. Leaders are to lead with zeal and diligence, not growing weary in doing good, not using authority to glorify themselves, but to glorify God. I cannot tell you how thankful I am for the elders who humbly, diligently, and prayerfully lead this church.

Mercy is the gift that runs to pain. It binds the wounds of the afflicted just like the Good Samaritan bound the wounds of the man who fell among the robbers along the road to Jericho (Luke 10:25–37). The gift of mercy has the capacity to impart the love of Christ to those who are wounded through prayer, support, and practical help.

These gifts are not mutually exclusive, but they are interdependent. They overlap and connect as members of the human body connect and work together. What binds all these gifts together is, of course, how they point us to Christ and help us mature in Christ.

We are called to worship together by serving one another. And through this mystery, we are blessed, and Christ is glorified. This, too, is part of our worship.

Conclusion

What I hope you can see from this text is that worship is not less than our singing—but it is so much more than our singing. True worship touches every component of our life.

We are so tempted to find our ultimate hope, our truest comfort, and our deepest rest in things that are not Christ. But God has made us for himself. And our hearts restless until we find our rest in him.² The only way to find rest in God is to respond to the one who calls to himself all who are weary and heavy laden (Matt 11:28).

For Christ is the one who became the ultimate living sacrifice, pleasing unto God (Heb 9:26–28). Christ is the one who humbled himself to endure death on a cross and now has been given the name above all names (Phil 2:6–11). He is the one who came to serve yet is worthy of all blessing, honor, glory, and power (Matt 20:28; Rev 5:13).

This is who Christ has revealed himself to be. He is the word of God become flesh (John 1:14). God has spoken and is speaking to us through Christ. We respond with worship.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we seek to live in light of who God has revealed himself to be in Christ. May we open our hearts to wonder evermore at the glory of his grace. And may we be those who worship him in spirit and in truth.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

- 1.) According to Romans 12:1, what is “spiritual worship”?
- 2.) Why is the word “therefore” in Romans 12:1 so important?
- 3.) Read Romans 12:2–4. How should the gospel change the way we think about ourselves and the world around us?
- 4.) Read Romans 12: 5–8. What does it mean to be a part of the body of Christ, and how might God be calling you to serve the body of Christ with your unique gifts?

² Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.