LIVING SACRIFICE

Throughout Romans, Paul has described the incredible and extraordinary generosity of God manifested in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. What response should this sacrificial generosity evoke in us? According to Paul, the only reasonable and rational response to God’s mercy is to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). If God sacrificed for us, we can do no less than present ourselves as a living sacrifice to Him.

In the Old Testament, most sacrifices were bloody (Hebrews 9:22). Jesus’ sacrifice certainly was. The sacrifice Paul calls us to is a living, not a dying sacrifice. A living sacrifice involves the surrender of our long-cherished ways and adding inclinations to God’s ways. We do this by presenting our bodies to God and refusing to conform to the ways of the world and by the continual transformation and renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2). The life of a living sacrifice involves both the body and the mind. Believers seek to conform their embodied lifestyle to their renewed minds.

Minds are not renewed once and for all. Throughout our lives, we will be continually challenged by new circumstances that require us to prove what is good and acceptable to God (Romans 12:2). Understanding the perfect will of God is an ongoing process that requires regular testing or proving. Day by day, we will encounter new and challenging opportunities to live out our Christian commitment. These challenges should be confronted prayerfully and responded to through the study of God’s Word.
Write out Romans 12:1–8 from the translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
AVOID THE TRAPS

A key component of presenting ourselves to God as living sacrifices is an accurate understanding of ourselves. To do this, we must be careful not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to. Conversely, we also shouldn’t unnecessarily denigrate ourselves. It seems that we typically fall into one trap or the other. We embrace either pride or despair. Rather than falling into either of these ditches, we should strive for an accurate self-assessment (Romans 12:3). An accurate self-assessment is only possible when we think of ourselves relative to the gift of faith that God has given us (Romans 12:3).

By faith, we can avoid the twin mistakes of pride and self-denigration. Faith in Jesus’ death helps us to appreciate better our infinite value and avoid the trap of self-denigration. Authentic faith in Jesus’ death also requires a frank admission of our sin, preventing pride. Ellen White summarized these points well when she said, “One reason for this is the low estimate which they place upon themselves. Christ paid an infinite price for us, and according to the price paid He desires us to value ourselves” (Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, 498).

By faith, we embrace our status as forgiven sinners. This is simultaneously humbling and empowering. Since we are all purchased with the blood of Christ, each one of us is equal in value. As members of one body, we each have our unique functions (Romans 12:4). None of us lives independent of the others (Romans 12:5). Like parts of the human body, each part serves its own function. When we exercised faith, we were saved as individuals. At the moment of salvation, however, we were incorporated into the body of Christ. As members of the body of Christ, we are radically intertwined with one another and interdependent with one another. Whatever our unique functions are, we are urged to use them to care for and build up the body of Christ.

The list of gifts Paul shares in Romans 12 is not exhaustive. In other texts, Paul presents different but mostly overlapping lists of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:27–31; Ephesians 4:11–13). What’s important isn’t so much the gift but the use of the gift. We are to use the gifts God has given us in a way that is equal to the grace we have been given (Romans 12:6). Each of us has been given grace equal to the gift of Christ (Ephesians 4:7). Whether our gift is prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, or showing mercy, we are to use it with all the energy God gives us to minister to and serve others.
A life of living sacrifice is a life lived in love (Romans 12:1, 9). The authentic life of love is not sentimentalism. Instead, it is manifested in intensely practical ways, beginning with hating evil and treasuring all that is good (Romans 12:9). In the body of Christ, we are called to express the kind of loving affection that exists between brothers and sisters (Romans 12:10).

Love is to be an active principle that extends itself for others. It is not mere tolerance. This kind of love is seen in the honor we show others by giving them preference over ourselves (Romans 12:10). Preferring others over ourselves is an act of self-sacrifice. When we surrender our own will and ego, we are following in the self-sacrificing footsteps of Jesus. How many relational problems would be solved if we preferred others over ourselves?

A life of living sacrifice touches on every part of our lives. It calls us to diligence and fervency as we serve Jesus (Romans 12:11). A life of living sacrifice calls on us to face trials with the tools of hope and prayer (Romans 12:12) and to care for others by extending hospitality to those in need (Romans 12:13). We embody the principles of living sacrifice when we embrace empathy and enter into the emotional experiences of others by weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice (Romans 12:15).

It is natural for people to want to spend time with those they find interesting and enjoyable. The life of living sacrifice calls us to avoid elevating ourselves and willingly associate with the humble (Romans 12:16). A life of living sacrifice reminds us that we should be humble and not regard our own opinions too highly. Instead, we should seek unity within the community (Romans 12:16).

A life of living sacrifice doesn’t only manifest itself within the church community. It is seen when we bless rather than curse our persecutors (Romans 12:14). It is seen when we refuse to return evil for evil but rather choose to be honorable (Romans 12:17). It is seen when we do all in our power to live at peace with others (Romans 12:18). Living lives of self-sacrificing love would provide, even to our persecutors, the best argument in favor of the gospel we believe and proclaim. “By the power of His grace manifested in the transformation of character the world is to be convinced that God has sent His Son as its Redeemer. No other influence that can surround the human soul has such power as the influence of an unselfish life. The strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian” (Ellen G. White, The Ministry of Healing, 470).
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

1 Corinthians 1:10
Ephesians 5:8–10
1 Peter 2:19–25
1 Peter 3:8–17

What other verses come to mind about practical love and Christian living?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 12.
Jesus is the model for the Christian’s life. He advanced His kingdom through the power of love and self-sacrifice rather than the typical tactics of the kingdoms of this world. The kingdoms of the world are built upon power, wealth, control, and force. Christ built His kingdom upon an entirely different foundation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spelled out the upside-down principles of His kingdom by blessing the poor, the mourning, the meek, and the hungry (Matthew 5:3–6).

In His life, Jesus associated with the blind, the lame, lepers, the deaf, and the poor (Luke 7:22)—the outcasts of society. He urged His followers to do the same (Luke 14:13). His kingdom wouldn’t be built because of the wise and mighty. Instead, God chose the foolish and weak things of this world to shame the mighty (1 Corinthians 1:26, 27).

Through weakness and apparent failure, Jesus was able to redeem humanity from sin and triumph over death. God works through death and resurrection (John 12:23, 24). The followers of Jesus are to walk the same path of death and resurrection that Jesus trod.

This means that when we have been wronged, and the desire for vengeance is kindled in our hearts, we should trust that God will deal with the unjust in the judgment (Romans 12:19). Instead of seeking revenge, we should seek to bless our enemies by caring for their needs. If they are hungry, we should feed them. If they are thirsty, we should give them a drink (Romans 12:20). By following the upside-down ways of Jesus’ kingdom, we will heap burning coals on the heads of our enemies (Romans 12:20). This doesn’t mean that they will suffer a physical judgment. It means that they will feel pangs of guilt and shame because of their evil behavior. The kind treatment of our enemies may well be just what they need to be confronted with the depth of their sin and guilt. In this way, rather than being overcome by evil, we are to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21).

When we are wronged and choose to live out the principles modeled in the life of Jesus, we are embodying what it means to be a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). We provide a window into the sacrificial death of Jesus and are confronting our enemies with the power of the gospel. Hopefully, it will lead to repentance and faith in Christ.
THE ROLE OF EACH WORKER

“Each worker, while preserving his individuality, should seek to labor in harmony with every other worker. Each is to be united with his fellow workers in bonds of Christian fellowship, and all are to be united with the Lord. The aim of every one is to be the advancement of the cause of truth. Each is to seek earnestly for the impartation of the Holy Spirit. . . .

“All are to do their best. All are to keep looking to their Leader, studying the lessons he has given in his guidance of his people from the beginning. . . .

“Those whom God chooses as his workers are not always talented, in the estimation of the world. Sometimes he selects unlearned men. These have a special work. They reach a class to whom others could not obtain access. Opening the heart to the truth, they are made wise in and through Christ. Their lives inhale and exhale the fragrance of godliness. Their words are thoughtfully considered before they are spoken. They strive to promote the well-being of their fellow men. They take relief and happiness to the needy and distressed. They realize the necessity of ever remaining under Christ’s training, that they may work in harmony with God’s will. They study how best to follow the Saviour’s example of cross-bearing and self-denial. . . .

“Constantly they are learning of the great Teacher, and constantly they reach higher degrees of excellence, yet all the time feeling a sense of their weakness and inefficiency. They are drawn upward by their strong, loving admiration for Christ. They practice his virtues; for their life is assimilated to his. Ever they move onward and upward, a blessing to the world and an honor to their Redeemer. Christ says of them, ‘Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.’

“Such workers are to be encouraged. Their work is done, not to be seen of men, but to glorify God. And it will bear his inspection. The Lord brings these workers into connection with those of more marked ability, to fill up the gaps they leave. He is well pleased when they are appreciated; for they are links in his chain of service. And it is his desire that every human instrumentality engaged in work for him shall be recognized, however small may be the work he does.

“Men who are self-important, who are filled with the thought of their own superior abilities, overlook these humble, contrite workers; but not for one moment does God lose sight of them. He marks all that they do to help those in need of help. In the heavenly courts, when the redeemed are gathered home, they will stand nearest the Son of God. They will shine brightly in the courts of the Lord, honored by him because they have felt it an honor to minister to those for whom he gave his life.”

Describe a time when you have prayerfully studied God’s Word to navigate a tricky moral dilemma.

How have you deliberately chosen to associate with the humble?

In what ways has following Jesus helped you to cultivate greater empathy?

Have you ever struggled to live at peace with someone? Did you do all you could? How did it resolve?

How can preferring others over ourselves contribute to unity in the church?

What does it mean to love without hypocrisy?

How have you used your gifts to build up the body of Christ?

Have you fallen into the ditch of either pride or self-deprecation? How has Jesus’ death in your behalf helped resolve this mistake?