



## What Is Reasonable Service?

~ Romans 12:1

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

What is *reasonable service*? It means many different things to different people; however, if we read on, Paul will tell us what he

means by reasonable service.

In an overview of the entire book of Romans, Romans 1-11 is the doctrinal section of the book, while Romans 12-16 is the ethical section. You cannot have one without the other. Otherwise, you end up with empty moralizing without a doctrinal undergirding, or the reverse, theory without practice. The ethical section is introduced with this verse about reasonable service. The doctrines of Romans 1-11 must translate into the service of Romans 12-16; and that service must be *reasonable service*.

First, we must say, there are no such things as perfect submission or perfect service --not so long as we are in this world. There are only people who claim to have them. Paul assures us in Philippians 3:12 that he had not arrived, he was only "pressing toward the mark." There is no such thing as a true blue believer, or a real believer; there are just believers and unbelievers. You are one or the other.

### **Now, what things are necessary if the believer is to give reasonable service to God?**

Verse one, we must give our bodies to service and to holiness. The incentive is fully sufficient, "the mercies of God." Holiness has an ethical connotation; which is *detachment from sin*. The Bible gives two aspects of sanctification. The first is judicial, "And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). That is our *judicial* position before God, as a result of the cross.

The second aspect is practical or progressive, as we like to say it. "Perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1). It is on-going. So we have two sides of the coin: Every believer is ready for Heaven, and every believer should be getting ready for Heaven. We are holy on the one hand, we are told to "be holy as I am holy" on the other.

Progressive sanctification is becoming more and more like the Lord Jesus. That sounds very noble, and all Christians will rally behind that banner until we begin to describe what Jesus was actually like. Very few people are like Jesus, because very few people want to have as little as Jesus had, serve as Jesus served, or die on a cross.

***It is the bodily members that give expression to our service.*** Jesus *controlled* his body, he *worked* his body tirelessly, he *deprived* his body, he *gave* his body. That is why 1 Thessalonians 5:23 says, "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Without sanctification extending to the body, our sanctification is just theory.

Verse two, "Be not conformed to this world." Why? It's not conducive to the sanctification of the body. A second requirement for reasonable service is also given; our minds must be transformed. Our minds must be adjusted to conform with the gospel; neither is that a "one shot" thing. It is, rather, a life-long process. This is going on in all of God's children to some degree. Some more than others.

***Verse 3-6, reasonable service requires that we evaluate our gifts.*** All of God's people have at least one of these gifts, "All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:11). Not all have the same gift (verse 4). It is a grand thing when everyone is in his or her proper place. Happy is the person who can find that place and stay there without getting in another's place or becoming envious.

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Romans 12:3). There is no reason to feel cheated or conceited.

Verses 6-8), "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."

Gifts enable us to contribute to the church. There is the gift of prophecy or preaching, which continues to be central to the ministry of the church. Here we are cautioned to "preach according to the proportion of faith (conviction, assurance)" of the passage we have. We are to do most of our preaching in the areas where there is little doubt as to the correctness of interpretation. That is exactly why the wise old Bible commentators skipped over controversial sections. That is also exactly why they gave both sides, all three sides, or all four sides when they did venture into shaky territory. The proper use of this gift is dependent on staying focused on the gospel, the cross, true Christian spiritual growth, and so forth. Stay on the high ground of faith. For the most part, park the swamp buggy.

*Ministry*, which is voluntary service to others, in the rendering of comfort, care, understanding, and the relief of suffering.

The *teachers*, of course, know how to convey information to other people. Some people are just better able to teach than others.

The *exhorter* can stir up people in the right way. I think these people are few and far between. All of us have the ability to stir people up in the wrong way. That is, it is no trick at all to collect up large groups of

people who are against something. Stirring up the Serbs in their cause of justice and fairness, to make right all the wrongs of World War II, I think, was no big job at all. It is not hard to stir people up and get them to act in aggressive, cruel, non-Christian ways toward people who have done wrong. For example, the Pharisees were good at getting crowds together for the righteous cause of stoning harlots. Yet, you never saw them stoning the men who forced them to become harlots. The new Christian militancy can easily spiral out of control as Christian character becomes increasingly mean-spirited and militant.

However, some people have the gift of getting people to act in loving, positive, healing, helpful, caring ways. These people have the gift of exhortation, rather than the gift of exciting people to vengeance. Teachers teach, while exhorters get people to apply the teaching. And the teaching isn't "Give them what they deserve," as we will find later in the passage.

The *giver* does more than the ordinary giving that we all do. The giver is generous to the point of going above and beyond.

The *leader*: I like it that the NRSV uses the correct word here -leader, not ruler. God's Church has had far too many rulers and far too few leaders. What is the difference? The Greek has it, "leading the way." Leaders demonstrate instead of dictate. These are people who show us how to be kind, show us how to forgive, show us how to be helpful, show us how to be understanding; they are willing to be out front cutting a path for us in all these things. They are diligent. They stay untiringly at the job.

The *compassionate* person knows how to console people. They not only speak words of cheer, they are cheer. I don't believe for a minute that everyone has this gift. Thank God, some people do.

Regarding all of these gifts Paul warns, "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith God has assigned" (Romans 12:3). There are extremes in people; some want the spotlight, others don't think they can do anything and want to hide under the bed. Neither response is appropriate. You need to evaluate your gifts --and your honest evaluation will be a humble evaluation.

***Now going on, all acceptable service is rendered in love.*** So Paul adds, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection." Genuine: this is not sham or superficial guff. This is not, "I can't stand the sight of you; but, I love you in the Lord." I can't see how some of these expressions we make up help at all. We either love or we don't. It is the love of God that is "shed abroad in *our* heart." It either is or it isn't. So, if you don't feel it, don't say it. You can actually feel love; if you tell someone that you love them and you feel nothing toward them, then you're mixed-up. To be sure, Biblical love is supernatural; I think we have to say that it will only work if you let it.

This love is not just sentimental, indulgent, and tolerant; it is discerning. Why do people think they need to throw away their own values, in order to love someone with whom they disagree? They don't. You can love those with whom you disagree.

And what about this "mutual affection and honor?" Are you happy when others do well? How about when they get credit?

"Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers" (Romans 12:11-13). There has never been a day when this passage has been more tested among Christians. We have in our church, the Masons, missionaries helping "strangers in Europe." Yet, they got disturbing "push back" about the idea from church people who think otherwise –like, "What are those people doing in Europe?" We had missionaries, Polly (Brackman) and John Reiser, working in Omaha Nebraska with 2,000 refugees from Burma –we think they are doing exactly what Jesus has asked us to do. Here's an idea for the Christian Church –let's go with Jesus on this. They may be "strangers" to you –but, not to Jesus.

The Holy Spirit takes the laziness out of us, giving us, not fanaticism, but motivation. It's a drive that's under control. It has the quality of being "patient in trouble." It's not a patience born of fatalism; it's a patience born of knowing that God will work things out; it's a patience born of knowing that God gives his saints grace to endure right to the end. It is a patience supported by both hope and prayer.

Certainly, love will enable you to be generous, even with strangers who may never give you credit, but look what else love will enable you to do:

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (that is, do your part). Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. (That is, the ball will be in their park, and you will have helped them to catch it.) Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:14-21). Do it with "good."

What is reasonable service? All of this is reasonable service. It is reasonable for three reasons:

First, nothing else will work.

Second, it is a perfect example of what Christ did.

Third, it is exactly the way God has treated us --we owe it.

Sometimes, we just have to go back to following the Christ, who gave the church birth 2,000 years ago. This is one such time. This is one such time. No! Don't expect to "Christianize" politics by becoming "un-Christian" yourself –It won't work.