

Main Idea: When you're in mercy's grip you will respond in two very practical ways according to Romans 12:1-2.

I. When gripped by mercy, you will use your body for God (1).

- A. It's appropriate.
- B. It's amazing.
  - 1. God wants your body.
  - 2. God wants it just the way it is.
- C. It's an act of worship.
  - 1. True worship is week-long.
  - 2. True worship is a life surrendered to God.

II. When gripped by mercy, you will use your mind for God (2).

- A. We must reject the world's pattern.
  - 1. Self-advancement must go.
  - 2. Self-indulgence must go.
- B. We must accept the will of God.
  - 1. This will affect your thinking.
  - 2. This will affect your choices.

Implications: How to tell if you've been gripped by mercy...

- 1. Is it obvious that my body is surrendered to God?
- 2. Is it obvious that my mind is being changed by God?

How did you begin the new year? Any new year's resolutions? *I will do this. I won't do that. My life is going to change this year in these ways...*

Typically, new year's resolutions are generated by the following motivation. *I'm not pleased with this aspect of my life and I want it to change.* That aspect could be a variety of things—diet, schedule, and so on—but the bottom line in terms of motivation is this. *I want to change because I want to change.*

But that's a deficient perspective on life. The issue for change really isn't whether I am pleased with my life, or not pleased with it. The issue is what God thinks about it. And change that is motivated for self-centered reasons typically doesn't last, and even if it does last, it lacks God's approval.

There's a better way to head into the new year, and it's this. I'd like to offer a challenge for all. I challenge you *to live in the grip of mercy.*

You say, “What's *that*, the *grip of mercy*?” You can tell a lot about a person by his or her grip. As a pastor, I shake a lot of hands. The grips I feel are indicators. There's one grip I've felt that won't let go. It's powerful and strong. It's the grip of mercy.

Have you felt the grip of mercy? It's life-changing. We'll see why and how this morning as we turn our attention to Romans 12. When you are in mercy's grip, when you've been gripped by what God has done for us in Christ, you will respond in the new year in two very practical ways according to Romans 12:1-2.

Take a look at this passage. Notice two words (you might circle them). In verse 1, it's the word “bodies.” In verse 2 it's the word “mind.” The grip of mercy affects both your body and your mind. How so? Let's find out.

### I. When gripped by mercy, you will use your body for God (1).

Listen to our text, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”

Before us is a familiar text, and it should be. We should return to this passage often as Christians. Notice it's intended for "brothers," that is, for Christians, people who have been gripped by mercy. This text offers us a precise call to *dedication*.

I must warn you at the outset that this text may unnerve you. It may unsettle you. It may upset the apple-cart of your comfortable life. Why so? Because this text talks about an unpopular subject in this day of convenience-store Christianity. It confronts us with dedication.

“What's involved in dedication?” you ask. In verse 1, we'll discover three aspects of true dedication from God's perspective.

**A. It's appropriate.** It's the right thing to do, as we'll see.

This morning, we are looking at the book of Romans, a book which is perhaps the highpoint of theology in the New Testament. You'll notice chapter 12 begins, "Therefore." That word becomes the fulcrum of the book. The doctrine of chapters 1-11 leads to duty in chapters 12-16. Romans 1-11 tells us what a righteous God has done to make us right with Him. Romans 12-16 tells us what we should do in light of what He has done.

You say, "What has God done?" A walk through Romans shows us. According to 1:18, He revealed His wrath against this godless world, missing no one. According to chapters 1-3, His righteous judgment affected every living person, including the heathen (ch. 1), the humanist and the Hebrew (ch. 2).

You see, our basic problem as people is that God is holy, and we are not. We lack what it takes to live in a right relationship with a holy God. We lack *righteousness*. The message of Romans is what God did to give sinners like us what we couldn't earn and desperately needed.

Chapter 3 indicates that through the atoning work of Christ, God declares righteous all who will trust in His Son. Justification, according to chapters 4-5, is attained by faith in Christ alone, apart from human effort.

That's not all God has done for us. In addition to justifying us, He sanctifies us--that is, He transforms our lives, as Paul explains in chapters 6-8. And lest we become proud as the beneficiaries of God's salvation, chapters 9-11 inform us that salvation is based on God's sovereign choice. From eternity past, God chose the Jews as His special people, and He chose undeserving Gentiles like us to be grafted in to His redemptive program.

How do you sum up what God has done for us? Paul does it with one word. *Mercy*. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's *mercy*."

*Mercy*. The Greek term is *oiktirmos*. It signifies inward feelings of compassion and sympathy, even pity. In 2 Corinthians 1:3 Paul uses the same word to identify God as "the Father of *compassion*."

This is intrinsic to God's character, beloved. He is a God who didn't give us what we deserved. That's His mercy. The truth that people like us who were once under God's wrath are now in His family and can pray, "Abba, Father." That's mercy. The realization that Christ took our place so we could enjoy the presence of God forever. That, my friend, is *mercy*.

Do you see the mercy? Paul did. He was gripped by mercy. And what happens when a person has been gripped by mercy? This. He dedicates his life to the One who showed him mercy. It's the *appropriate* thing to do.

Seven-year-old Billy sat on the couch with his eyes glued to the ground. He knew what was coming. He knew he deserved it, too. He'd broken his father's antique clock while bouncing his basketball in the living room (an activity he knew to be forbidden in his household).

His father spoke firmly, "Billy, what you did was wrong. You disobeyed me. Your sin hurt your mother and me deeply."

"I know, Dad. I know what I deserve, too," Billy said solemnly. "I should be punished for what I did."

"You're right," the father replied. "You should be. For what you've done, you deserve to be punished. But I'm not going to. I'm going to show you *mercy* this time. There will be no punishment. You may go."

Answer this. How do you think you'd feel if you were Billy? I propose you'd hop down off that couch and into your daddy's lap, and blurt out, "Oh, daddy, thank you, thank you. I'll never do it again! You're the greatest!"

You see, dedication flows out of a person who has been gripped by mercy. It's the appropriate thing to do. Secondly...

**B. It's amazing.** In this world of computer chips, big-screen TV's, and high-tech communication, it's hard for people to be *amazed* anymore. We turn on our television sets and watch the launch of space shuttles, the signing of multi-million-dollar contracts by professional athletes, and we become numbed to the awesome.

But if you want to come face to face with something really amazing, then ponder two truths from verse 2.

1. *God wants your body.* "I beseech you therefore, brethren [as the KJV puts it], by the *mercies* of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice."

"I *urge* you," the verse begins. Paul is doing more than teaching us. He's beseeching us. He's pleading with us. He's exhorting us to do something. With what? Our *soma* (Greek), our *bodies*. Yes, he invites us to offer our bodies to God. A Greek would never say that. To the Greek, what mattered was the spirit; the body was only a prison-house. But the Bible teaches that the body belongs to God just as much as the spirit does.

The verb "offer" (KJV "present") is in the aorist tense which stresses the decisiveness of the act. This isn't something we do over and over with continual renegeing. This is a life-changing dedication, a once-and-for-all presentation.

In Israel, before a priest could minister on behalf of others, he had to consecrate himself to God by offering sacrifices to God that were without blemish (Mal. 1:8-13). In the Old Testament economy, thousands of lambs were offered to God. But what does God want from us? Don't miss this. He wants our *bodies*.

Does it surprise you that God would want that, your *body*? For one thing, God owns everything. Why would He want our bodies? Think of it. Your body is the seat of what Paul elsewhere calls "the flesh" (Rom. 6:6, 12), that antagonistic propensity we have that resists God and God's ways. Your body is the instrument that yields to temptation.

You say, "Why would God want my body? It snores. It has a bad heart. It aches when I wake up in the morning. It's always causing me problems. My spirit, now that's a different story. I worship God with my spirit. I have good intentions in the depth of my soul. But my body? My body doesn't cooperate with my spirit. Surely God wouldn't want my body."

But He does. And that's not all that's amazing. Here's a second amazing truth about your body.

2. *God wants it just the way it is.* "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices," Paul admonishes. God's Word doesn't tell us to get cleaned up and patch up the brokenness of our bodies *before* we give them to God. No. It says, "Give God your body--with all its problems, with all its tendency to temptation--give it to God just the way it is."

Ray Stedman says it well, "I don't know how this affects you, but it encourages me greatly. All other religions tell us we must clean up our lives first, and then offer them to God. God never talks that way. He says, 'Come to me just the way you are. I am the answer to your problems; therefore, start with me. You can't handle those problems yourself. Don't start with the idea that you have to straighten them out. Come to me, because I have the answers.'"

That's what John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace" did. He was converted on March 10, 1748, and once said, "I went to Africa that I might be able to sin to my heart's content. I was a wild beast on the coast of Africa till the Lord caught and tamed me."

Yes, God's grace and mercy are amazing, and so is the fact that He would even want us to surrender our bodies to Him. Dedication is appropriate, amazing, and thirdly...

**C. It's an act of worship.** "I urge you...to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship." In the Greek text, the final phrase is unclear. The KJV translation says that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice "which is your reasonable service."

The word translated "worship" (or "service") has an interesting history. It is *latreia*, which originally meant "to work for hire or pay."<sup>1</sup> It referred to a laboring man giving his strength to an employer in return for the pay he would receive. It denotes, not slavery, but the voluntary undertaking of work. In time, the word came to mean "that to which a man gives his whole life." It's the idea of dedication.

In the Bible, the word refers to giving service and worship to God. This is key, and reveals two implications for us concerning true worship.

1. *True worship is week-long.* True worship is offering to God your body. Sometimes we equate worship with what happens inside a church building. That's too narrow. According to the Bible, worship does not start nor end in church. You are worshipping or not worshipping all week long, depending on what you are doing with your body.

The KJV uses the adjective "reasonable." It is our "reasonable service" to offer God our bodies. The Greek term can be translated "logical" or as the NIV states, "spiritual." Do you realize that using your body for God at work is just as much an act of worship as using your vocal cords to sing in church?

A few years ago I talked to a old friend from High School. I began the conversation, saying, "Hey, you haven't changed much!" To which he responded, "I sure hope I have!" Indeed, he has, for the Lord has transformed him.

He told me he left a good job with an established construction company six months ago to start his own business with a Christian friend. I asked him why. He replied, "I was making a good living before, but I was bothered by the company's attitude towards money. I wanted to see my effort and the company's money be used for God's glory, not to line the pockets of a self-focused owner. So we started a new company with that commitment. It's been great!"

Do you see your job as a way to worship God? We say, "I'm going to church today to worship God," and so we should. But we should also be able to say, "I'm going to the A-

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<sup>1</sup>see Barclay, p. 156-7.

plant today to worship God." Or, "I'm going to Wheelersburg Elementary School today to worship God." Why? Because true worship is week-long. Another implication.

2. *True worship is a life surrendered to God.* Paul uses three adjectives to describe the kind of sacrifice we should present to God. It's to be "living" (as opposed to mere ritual), "holy" (pure, set-apart), and "pleasing" to God (i.e. acceptable--what really matters is not what people think about what we do with our bodies, but what *God* thinks).

May I ask you something? Have you surrendered your body to God? You see, worship is allowing God to use your body for His honor wherever you are. At work. In the lunchroom. On the ball court. In the music studio. In the living room. Worship is the surrender of your body to God seven days a week.

Be honest. Do you view your body as *God's* or *yours*? You see, if you are a Christian, your body belongs to God. It's not yours (1 Cor 6:19). But God invites you to offer it to Him willingly. Which is what we will *want* to do if we've been gripped by mercy.

So who controls your body really? As you enter this new year I charge you, resolve to use your body for God. It's the natural thing to do if you've been gripped by mercy.

You may be thinking, "Wait. I do want to please the Lord with my body. I have dedicated my life to Him. Why do I still struggle in my Christian walk?" Because verse 2 says, dedication isn't the end. The grip of mercy must affect something in addition to your body. What is it? Verse 2 tells us.

## II. When gripped by mercy, you will use your mind for God (2).

Verse 2—"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing, and perfect will."

Lest we think, "This talk about giving our bodies to God is pie-in-the-sky, by-and-by," God's Word becomes very specific in verse 2. It's as if the Lord says, "Once you offer your body to Me, I'll take it. You can come to Me just as you are. But I won't let you remain that way. I'm going to change you. I'm going to *transform* you. And in this transformation process, you have some responsibilities, two of them, both involving your *mind*."

Here's what we must do as people under the grip of mercy, two responsibilities...

**A. We must reject the world's pattern.** "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world." Some people at this point begin to think, "Oh, I know what that is. It means don't smoke, or drink, or play cards, and if you're really spiritual, you won't go to movies."

Listen, standards are good, but if you think Paul has in mind some kind of "do's-and-don'ts" list in verse 2, you've missed it. I know people who've given up the above-mentioned "vices," yet who are saturated by the spirit of the world. And that's what the word "world" means in verse 2—the pattern and outlook of *this age*. The Greek term is *aion*. The literal rendering is, "Do not be conformed to the *schemes* of this world."

Fellow Christian, the schemes of this world never change. The "wrapping paper" changes, but what's in the box is the same for us as it was for Paul. The spirit of this age is the advancement of *self*. We find ourselves in a world full of people who live to advance *self*. Verse 2 is calling us to get rid of a whole lot more than a few bad habits. It's the very spirit of this age we must deny.

Let me be specific. If we are to reject the world's pattern, we must eliminate two things from our lives.

1. *Self-advancement must go.* Our natural inclination in this world is the advancement of self. Before we do something, we want to know, "What's in it for me?" "If I take that job, if I move to that city, if I make that friend, if I put that money in the offering, what will I get out of it?" But God says, "Don't be locked into that kind of thinking. Don't let the world squeeze you into the mold of self-advancement."

E.g.—

Also...

2. *Self-indulgence must go.* The spirit of this age is to seek for personal happiness. Sadly, Christians think this way as much as anyone. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I'm thinking of leaving this church, and going to another one because this one doesn't meet my needs." As though the only reason for ever going to church is to have your needs met! That's the world's thinking. To think that way is to be worldly, regardless of whether one smokes or drinks or plays cards.

Worldly thinking shows up in lots of ways...

E.g.—

My friend, a dedicated life is a transformed life. If we are truly under the grip of mercy, we will reject the world's pattern. But that's only half of the process of transformation. You'll notice in verse 2, the negative is followed by a positive.

**B. We must accept the will of God.** "But be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will." There are two processes that must go on everyday in our lives. Renunciation and renewal. Putting off and putting on. Not being conformed, but being transformed.

The Greek term for "transformed" comes into English as *metamorphosis*. The same word appears in the transfiguration narrative. But don't miss this. The word Paul uses indicates a process, not a one time event. We're talking about continual, radical change.

Know this. When you accept the will of God instead of the world's pattern, it will show up in two areas.

1. *This will affect your thinking.* "How does transformation happen?" you ask. It starts with your *mind*. "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

What kind of things are you taking into your mind? That's the issue. What are you listening to, reading, and watching? What do you think about in a day's time?

May I offer this challenge as we embark on a new year? If you are serious about transformation, you need a consistent intake of the Word of God. It won't just happen either. A plan can help. Here's one--a schedule for reading through the Bible in a year. By reading two to three chapters from the Old Testament in the morning, and one chapter from the New Testament in the evening, you will fill your mind with the entire Word of God in twelve months (reading schedules are available). If you're not a reader and that venture sounds too challenging, start by reading just through the New Testament. Fill your mind with God's truth one chapter a day.

Is there anything magical about Bible reading? No. But if you do it consistently with a teachable heart, something amazing will happen.

And go beyond reading the Word. Memorize and meditate on it. Fill your mind with the Scriptures.

E.g.—

The Word of God will change your life. It will *transform* you. And if you accept the will of God instead of the world's pattern, it will show up in another area. First, your thinking, then...

2. *This will affect your choices.* You see, our guide for choices is not the world's pattern, but the *will of God*—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The world says, "Get more and more." God's will says, "It's more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35)."

The world says, "Look out for #1." God's will says we must deny self, and follow Christ (Mt. 16:24).

The world says, "He who dies with the most toys wins." God's will says that he who dies to himself wins (1 Pet. 2:24).

The world says, "Never let anyone take advantage of you." God's will says, "Turn the other cheek (Mt. 5:39)."

The world says, "Eat, drink, and be merry." God's will says, "Seek first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33)."

The world says, "Look within yourself for your answers." God's will says we should look to Christ, who alone is the answer (Col. 2:3).

I read a true story that illustrates what happens when a person is gripped by mercy. It's about the opera singer Jerome Hines.<sup>2</sup> As a trained and talented musician, Hines became possessed with a desire to become a star in the Metropolitan Opera Company. That's what he lived for. He gave up all other pursuits in order to train and achieve his goal. He perfected the arts of intonation, of musical projection, and learned several languages so he could sing operatic roles. And it paid off. He became a star. Except Hines knew that inside he was still hollow and empty.

One day Hines heard a man singing. The voice was as good as his, and the man could have done what he did. It was George Beverly Shea singing, "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold, I'd rather be His than have riches untold, I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today."

God worked in the heart of Jerome Hines. Hines began to think about his life, and became a Christian. But he didn't quit the opera, though many people thought he should have. They thought the opera was "worldly." The opera is not worldly--except to people in opera who think like worldlings and live like worldlings. Yes, Hines stayed in opera, but everything was different. He no longer sang for the advancement of Jerome Hines, but for the glory of God. He dedicated his ability, his talent, his work to his new purpose.

Then came his golden opportunity. The role he had always wanted to sing and for which he had trained for months came. He was given a contract that stated he was to sing this role in the opera for ten years. Ray Stedman tells what happened to Hines<sup>3</sup>:

"One day when he went to the opera house to practice for it, he found some people performing a rather lewd dance and was told, 'This is the choreography introducing the opera.' He said, 'There's nothing in the opera like this!' 'No,' they said, 'we're changing it a bit, modernizing it, bringing it up to date.' Hines said, 'I won't sing if you are going to have this kind of dance in it.' He was told he had better go talk to Mr. Bing.

"Hines went to Rudolph Bing, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, and said to him, 'Sir, if you have that dance in the opera I am not going to sing in it.' Bing told him, 'If you don't sing, you will be ostracized and blacklisted in opera. You are under contract to sing.' Hines said, 'Sir, I can't sing in that opera. I am not going to let my name be used to entice people to come in to see filth like this. You can break me, sir, and the union can

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<sup>2</sup>as told by Ray Stedman, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.p. 98.

break me. I've worked hard for months to train for this role, but I will not sing in your opera if that dance is in it.'

"Bing said, 'Jerome, you don't have to sing. If you really feel this way, we'll get someone else. But we can't change the contract.' So Hines gave up the role. It cost him, over the period of ten years, something like a hundred thousand dollars."

My friend, are you *that* gripped by mercy? "How can I tell?" you ask...

Implications: How to tell if you've been gripped by mercy...

Ask yourself two questions.

1. *Is it obvious that my body is surrendered to God?* Have you settled this fundamental issue of who owns your body? Is it the Lord's, *for real?* If not, offer it to Him today.

Do you know the Lord Jesus personally? Have you accepted Him as your Savior and placed your faith in what He did in His atoning work? Is He truly your Lord? Have you surrendered your body to God? Real change starts right here.

But it doesn't end there. So a second question...

2. *Is it obvious that my mind is being changed by God?* Is there evidence? If not, what steps do you need to take to be changed? Are there sinful habits you need to reject, and godly habits to adopt?

Why not today? I challenge you to leave this place *in the grip of mercy*.