

“The Power of Mercy”

Romans 12:1

Romans 12:1-2 is perhaps the best known part of all that Paul wrote. Verse 2 points us in the direction of being different from the world around us which hates the Lord. Before he begins to consider that officially, Paul unfolds a great deal of how the first six chapters apply to our everyday life here in v.1. That’s where we will look together this morning.

Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

A few years ago, Lee from Lake Forest, Illinois, was buying an airline ticket on the internet for his wife, Susan, so she could fly from Chicago to Dallas to help her sister move.

Think about where you shop most often. Perhaps its Walmart...or Target...or Menards. The more often one shops someplace, the more walking through that store can be a comfortable habit. Buying flight tickets online had become a habit like that for Lee...quite easy and straightforward:

- ✓ He picked the time
- ✓ Checked one passenger
- ✓ one-way
- ✓ the airline
- ✓ even the seat assignment.

Then he checked that he understood this was non-refundable and nontransferable, and that his credit card would be charged. He clicked on “Yes, I’m sure. This will complete my transaction.”

Just then he noticed that the name he had put down for the ticket was his own - not Susan’s. He panicked. HE didn’t want to fly to Dallas and he didn’t want to swallow \$152 goof. So, heart pounding, he called American Airlines. “Sorry,” the guy said after conferring with his supervisor. “There’s nothing we can do.” As you can imagine, he just felt sick. The American Airlines guy said Lee might try calling Travelocity one of the many companies that shuffle things like that for airlines.

As you might guess, the answering machine for the company said: “Due to the large volume of calls you may have to wait.” So he waited... ten minutes... before anyone came on to talk with him. I’ll let Lee tell you the rest of the story.

“Then Jacob came on the line. “Jacob,” I said, “I made a terrible mistake, and I'm hoping you can help me. I explained what had happened. “No problem,” Jacob said. “I'll delete your transaction here, and you can go online and redo your reservation.”

“Really, Jacob? Just like that? No penalty or anything?”

“No problem,” Jacob said.

“Jacob, you are a gift from God! You made my day.” If he had been there, I surely would have hugged him.

What Lee experienced first-hand that evening was mercy. And, just like Lee, if your debt is large enough and then you have it erased, it is a bonding experience. That's mercy. As we look today at the letter Paul wrote to the church in Rome, let's think for a few minutes about what he says about mercy. One thing we need to see about mercy is that...

1) God is In Our Corner

Mercy becomes our power when we recognize the freedom it provides. We can't expect to serve God very effectively when we are carrying a load of guilt on our back. With God in our corner, we've been released from the burden of sin. By God's grace we stand tall...ready...able to do God's will. God's work in our behalf provides the encouragement that makes us strong.

Have you ever watched a very young boxer in the Olympics or professionally fighting? In spite of their great ability and physical fitness, being young leads them to make many many mistakes. Yet, even when an immature boxer's own “show-boating” sets him up for a punch he wasn't looking for, I've never seen a coach walk out on his athlete. No matter what the fault, the coaches stay in their fighter's corner.

God's grace reminds us that HE always remains in OUR corner, too. Even when we, like a young boxer, get knocked down because of our mistakes...because of our sins...because of our self-centeredness...God never turns His back on us. Instead, He encourages us. He puts us back on our feet again and He gives us the strength to keep on going. So, He's in our corner. But there's more...

2) God Also Provides What We Need

Most of the time when any of us look at this passage, we read it all wrong. Here's what we so often hear it saying: “Because of God's mercy, live as a human sacrifice and THEN you will

please the Lord.” What we miss is that the verse doesn’t ONLY talk about pleasing God. It ALSO talks about being holy. That should give us a clue that we weren’t reading the first part of it with the right understanding.

No matter how much we sacrifice, we cannot make ourselves holy to God. God’s standard of holiness is higher than anything we can dream of or imagine. It is perfection. Our best efforts will not make us “holy.” If we are to be holy, it’s only because God made it so. That’s the point!

The words “holy” and “pleasing” aren’t conditions of God’s acceptance; rather, they are fruits of his mercy. These key words aren’t descriptions of what we will be. They are declarations of what we are. In Christ we are holy and pleasing to God. God’s in our corner. He gives us what we need to please Him. And...

3) God Gives Us the Strength We Need

We may still find ourselves saying: “Lord, thanks for the wealth of mercy; You sure know I need it, and I would like to serve you better. I wish I could, but you know me. You know I can’t please you. I am trapped in this sin...or in this job...or in this relationship.

Every time I think of this, I hear the voice of Winnie the Pooh’s friend, the old grey donkey Eeyorr. What would HE sound like when he realized once more he had failed.

“Lord...you might as well give up on me. I have...well I blew it. You know...I CAN’T change. You know I’ll never be able to please You...You might as well give up on me...”

But then each time I begin to think like this again, each time I begin to doubt whether I have any value at all, then I hear another voice. One that’s kind. One that is soft. It is so gentle. And in almost a whisper I hear him say, “I’ve already made you pleasing to me.”

I cannot believe what I am hearing. “Me ? With all my sin? With all my shame? Me ?”

Once again the gentle one replies:“Yes...yes. You are able to please me.”

I know it sounds impossible; it sounds amazing; but God declares that sinful people please Him. He uses Paul to remind us of that right here in this verse:

“He has made us living sacrifices, holy and “pleasing” to Him.”

Because we are holy through the work of His Son, God declares that we already please Him. In spite of our imperfections; no matter how often we find ourselves choosing once more to do what we know is wrong; God's response is clear and it remains the same: "You are holy and you please me." This is a wonderful assurance, and the result is power.

If you have turned your tv on in the last couple of weeks, you have at least heard the scores of final four basketball games in the NCAA playoffs. You saw reruns of the play when Louisville guard, Kevin Ware, broke his leg so horribly. Perhaps you watched when Michigan's young player hit three-pointer after three pointer even though his back muscles were all in spasm. Whether basketball is your favorite sport or not, there were some amazing performances.

They weren't the only athletes to ever perform better than anyone expected. In the 1980 Olympic games, Soviet coaches deceived one of their weight-lifters. They told him the weight that he was lifting on his final lift was 499 pounds, a weight he had lifted before in practice and felt certain he could handle.

Yet on that day, the coaches had instructed Olympic officials to put 500.5 pounds on the bar. This was a world-record weight the athlete had never been able to hoist before. He stepped to the bar and lifted it. Believing that he could do the task, he did it.

There is power for us in believing that we are able and we know that we are able to please God because His Word says so. We do not gain this ability to please God by some trick or if we practice just a bit more on our own. It comes by the work of His Spirit in us. It comes by His mercy.

Satan would love for us to believe that we can do nothing. He wants to paralyze us with self-doubt and past shame. In contrast, God has filled us with his Spirit of power, and cleansed us with the blood of his Son.

That is why He tells us here in His Word that we are able to please Him and we are able to serve Him. In fact, our lives can be a joy to Him; our service can build His kingdom. He says so. We can go about the business of God with confidence because His blessing; His grace; His mercy all take what we do as we seek to walk with and serve Him and He makes it pleasing to Him.

So, the next time you are sure you have failed and He cannot possibly love you anymore, hold onto His blessing, remember once more His grace, and with all you have inside you cling to His mercy.

Pray with me.