

# SELECTIVE SERVICE

by David H. Roper

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I was walking across the Stanford campus a few weeks back and I saw a birdbath under a bush. The bush covered it so I could hardly see it. It was a very unusual birdbath. I usually don't pay much attention to birdbaths. I'm not a bird and I didn't particularly need a bath. The thing that struck me about this birdbath was that it was very ornate, carved from one piece of marble, a very delicate and lovely work of art. It had a slender fluted column and a little carved basin on the top. Some of you may have seen it. Obviously it's construction had required a lot of work. Someone had invested months in that little project. But this unusual and lovely object had fallen into disuse. The bowl was full of stagnant water. Even the birds had abandoned it and the gardeners had allowed it to become overgrown with bushes. I went away from that encounter thinking about the man who had made it -- the hours, the effort, dedication, and energy he had invested in that forgotten, useless birdbath. And as I walked away I asked from my heart, "Please, Lord, don't let me make birdbaths. Don't let me invest my life where it does not count and spend my time and energy on enterprises that are valueless in your eyes."

I am sure that I am simply reflecting your own attitude. You want your life to count too. You want to invest it where the results will be lasting and worthwhile in God's sight. And you should know that it is not God's intent for you to waste your life. Paul writes in Ephesians 2 that "we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." God already has a program of good works ("good" by his definition), and he wants us to walk in them. It has been his purpose from eternity to show us what that plan is, and to enable us to walk in those good works.

As always, the Scriptures do not leave us in the dark; they tell us how we can discover that plan for our lives. That is what I find in this passage in Romans 12. There are three words that tell us how to discover God's intended purpose for us. The first is *presentation* in verse 1; the second is *transformation*, in verse 2; and the third is *evaluation*, in verse 6.

**I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.** (Romans 12:1) NASV

**And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.** (Romans 12:2) NASV

**For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.** (Romans 12:3-8) NASV

When we approach the Scriptures the first law of Bible study is to observe the context. It is especially important in this passage because of the preposition "therefore," which introduces the verse.

Wherever you encounter this word in Scripture it almost always implies a logical conclusion based upon something that has been written previously. Certain things are true; therefore we are to present our bodies a

living sacrifice . . . "

As a matter of fact, this verse is the hinge on which the whole book of Romans turns. If you know this book you will remember that the first chapters deal with the ruin of man. The route to God, as some one has said, is a road blown up by sin. Man has ruined his relationship to God and has ruined his opportunities to be the kind of person that God wants him to be. But God, in his love and grace, has done something about man's ruin. He has reclaimed man from that lost state. He gave his Son to die for us and in his death we have forgiveness for past sins. We need never be inhibited, frustrated, and oppressed by sins in the past; we are forgiven in Christ. And through his life we have power over sin in the present and future.

You see, God has done everything that needs to be done for us. He has set us free from the past, and he has given us power and potential to live as God intends us to live now. That is the message in the first chapters of Romans. That is what God has done for us. That is a demonstration of the mercy of God (note verse 1) and mercy always speaks to our helplessness. Before, although we thought that we could do something for our self, God saw us as helpless and he engineered this program to set us free. "Therefore," Paul says, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice." That is the only logical thing we can do. That is the only option in the universe that is worthwhile. We have to give our bodies to something. We have to lay our bodies on the line for some ideal. Paul asks, "Why not this one?" In a world that is seemingly so absurd and meaningless, the one thing that does make sense to Paul is the fact that God has set us free: therefore, the only logical thing to do is to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to him.

This word "present" is a very powerful word. It literally means to stand at attention, to make oneself available. So when we present our bodies we are saying, "Lord, here is my body to use as you see fit. I'll no longer use it as an instrument for self-gratification; I'll not use it as an instrument to secure my own goals, to do my own thing. Rather it is available to you to be put to use in whatever enterprise you see fit. Here is my body, presented to you, to use as your instrument. Lord, I'm available." That is where we start; by presenting our bodies a living, holy sacrifice to God.

Paul says that "is your spiritual service of worship." That helps us to understand what worship is. It is not an emotion you experience when you hear a beautiful choir. I have a new record album at home, "Switched-on Bach", and every time I clamp the head phones on and listen to it I get the big time tingles. I sometimes get the same sensation sitting in a church service when I hear a song beautifully sung. But that is not worship. That is merely something that takes place in the emotions. True worship, Paul writes, is something that takes place in the will. It is responding to God by yielding up ourselves. It is our response to his revelation of himself. God says, "This is what I am like." And we say, "Right, Lord, here's my body to do with it as you see fit."

Now that is the first word -- *presentation* . And we will never know God's will for our life until we present our bodies as a living sacrifice to him. Jesus said, "If the eye is single, then the whole body will be full of light. But if the eye is dual (or evil), how great is that darkness." If we have one eye on Jesus and the other eye on anything else, the result will be darkness. We will never know God's plan for our life. We will live in confusion and frustration and darkness. We will be completely confused about our place and we will never discern his will. But if the eye is single, if we have both our eyes on Jesus Christ, our body will be full of light. We will know, we will understand, we will be able to perceive clearly where God wants us to invest our lives. Someone has said, "you can never have the abundant life until you have the abandoned life." You can never know the joy, the freedom, and the excitement of true Christian living until you are willing to follow him wholeheartedly, with no reservations, fencing off no area of your life. But when you give him all of your life, when you let him invade all of you, then you will begin to enter into the excitement and joy of abundant Christian living.

I was talking to a girl last week who told me that she had been down south at a Campus Crusade conference. She heard one statement the entire week that changed her life. The speaker, in passing, said, "Why don't you just let go, and let God?" Perhaps she had heard that statement many times before, but this time it struck home. For the first time in her life, she let go. She abandoned herself to Jesus Christ. That was the beginning of a new life for her, just as it will be the beginning of a new life for you and for me, when we are willing to take that step.

The second word is found in verse 2 -- *transformation* :

**And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove (or literally, experience for yourself) what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.** (Romans 12:2) NASV

J. B. Phillips, in his New Testament in Modern English, translates the passage in this way:

**Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould but let God remould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity.** (Romans 12:2)

You see, from the time we are little children, the world begins to squeeze us into its mold. You cannot isolate yourself from the world. We grow up with the philosophies and concepts of the world ringing in our ears. All our lives the world makes its impact upon us. Perhaps we are not even aware of our level of absorption of the world's ideas. There is no way to isolate ourselves from it, no way to combat it, except as we allow the Spirit of God to use the word of God to transform our minds from within. That is the only defense. Paul says,

**"And we all, with unveiled (or open) face, beholding (as in a glass) the glory of the Lord (or the image of Jesus), are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."** (2 Corinthians 3:18) NASV

The word "changed" is the same word that is translated "transformed" in our passage in Romans. As we look into the mirror of the word of God, and see the face of Jesus, and allow the Spirit of God to use that word in our life--he begins to transform our minds. He causes us to be disconformed to the world. He changes our attitudes and ideas so that we think God's thoughts after him. We stop reflecting the mind of the world; we reflect the mind of the Father.

It is important that we understand this because if we are conformed to the world, Paul implies, we will never know what God's will for us may be. If we accept the world's analysis of problems and situations we will miss God's best for us. The world never knows what the strategic areas are. They constantly miss them. Their programs are short-range and superficial; they never hit at basic problems.

In working with students over the past years I have seen many dedicated students who want to invest their lives in something meaningful, so they plug into various enterprises: They march with grape strikers, or get involved in the anti-war movement, or the off-ROTC or the on-ROTC movement, or they get involved in ecology, or civil rights, or voter registration, or some other project. But unfortunately these causes are always short-lived and the whole world goes off and leaves them behind. They are left in a little pocket, doing what they feel is strategic, but what now no one else thinks is important. Right now ecology is the thing but, as you know, there is an anti-ecology movement afoot. Two years from now who knows what the popular cause will be.

If we follow the world's thinking we will constantly be investing our life in areas that do not count for anything. That is why Paul says, Don't follow the world's way of thinking, don't let the world squeeze you into its mold, but be transformed by the word of God. Put your self under the authority of that book and allow it to speak to you. Allow the Spirit of God to conform your thinking, your attitudes, and thus your actions, to what is in this word. That is the only way we can know God's will.

If you look at the life of Jesus you see an illustration of this principle. The Lord was always an enigma to men of the world. Why would he spend thirty years of his life in obscurity, working in a carpenter's shop, when the world was crying out in desperate need? Why would he do that? Why were there times of great urgency in the Lord's ministry when he devoted himself wholeheartedly to teaching and evangelism and other times when he would withdraw from the crowds and go away alone into the mountains. Why?

Well, the secret of his life is spelled out in these words: "I always do those things that please the Father. His will was always submitted to the Father. He didn't look to the world to dictate where he would invest his time. He was subject to his Father's word. And at the end of his life he could say, "I have finished the work that you

gave me to do." He did not waste one minute, he did not fritter away one second; every moment of his life was invested in worthwhile enterprises. why? Because he always did those things that were pleasing to the Father. He walked to the cadence of the Father. And if we want to know God's will for our lives, if we want a place of service that will be of value to the world -- to lost men without Jesus Christ -- and of value to the body of Christ as well, we have to begin by allowing the word of God to transform our thinking from within. Then we will prove in our experience what the will of God is. We will know it, and it will be good, it will be acceptable, it will be perfect.

Some of you met Pat Dillon a few weeks ago. Pat is one of our long haired friends who is hitchhiking across the country, asking the Lord to use him wherever he finds a need. Pat and his friend Scott have been used to lead many people to Christ in the last few months. Recently they felt that God wanted them to come back to Palo Alto from Arizona. Pat is a student at Stanford and that might have been one explanation for his return. But there was no good reason for coming back here. They were almost broke and were on their way to Chicago but they felt that God wanted them here.

So they came to Palo Alto. I'm sure they must have wondered why God wanted them here, but they were certain this was where they were need ed. Two days before they were to leave, one of our faithful girls from the college department called Bill Tankersley and asked if he would come to Stanford Hospital and talk to an 18-year-old young man who was dying from Hodgkin's disease, and who was not a Christian. Bill said he would and invited Pat to come along. Pat confided that he was very happy to go because his own brother had died of Hodgkin's disease when *he* was 18-years-old. Tank and Pat went to see this young man. Pat related his experience -- what his brother had gone through, and what it meant for his brother to know the Savior. Tank shared the Gospel and this young man received Christ.

The next day Pat and Scott took off for Chicago with a \$100 check in their pocket that God gave them as a dividend. It arrived in the mail the morning before they were to leave -- a gift from someone back east they had talked to on one of their stops. It was just enough to get them back to where they had left off. It was so clear to all of us that God brought Pat here to contact that one man, then he sent him back across the country to finish what he was doing.

'That sounds ridiculous. The world would ridicule that sort of thinking, but that is the excitement of walking to the Father's cadence. The Lord tells us what we are to do. And that comes only as we are willing to submit ourselves to him and to his authority.

*Presentation , transformation , then third, evaluation ::*

**For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body, and at the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:3-8) NASV**

There is a word I would like to say here about humility. I believe that verse 8 is a definition of true humility. Humility is not self-deprecation, but rather, it is "not thinking more of yourself than you ought to think, but thinking soberly." We ought to discover our place in God's program and be content with that, wanting nothing more nor less than that place. That is true humility. We are so inclined to deprecate ourselves. We say, "Oh, I can't do anything. God can't use me." Paul says God can use you. He has a place for your life and you ought to be in that place. It is your responsibility to find that place and to want nothing more nor less.

I mentioned once before in a message that John the Baptist stands out to me as a very adequate illustration of true humility. The Jews asked him, "John, are you the Messiah?" John said, "No." "Are you that prophet that should come?" John said, "No." "Who are you, then?" John didn't say, "well, I'm not anybody." He said,

"I'm the voice of one crying in the wilderness," which was a very audacious statement. He was saying that he was the one prophesied in Isaiah and Malachi who would come to be the forerunner of Messiah. You see, John was content with nothing less than that. Nothing more, that's true; he didn't try to be the Messiah, but he wanted nothing less. And neither should we.

Paul writes in these remaining verses that there are two things we ought to know. First, God has a place for you. He uses an analogy between the body of Christ and the human body. Just as in the human body there is one body but many members with diversity and complexity and variety in function, so it is in the body of Christ. Though we are one in Christ, we are diverse. Each member has a unique function -- a *spiritual* gift. God grants to the believer at the moment of conversion a spiritual gift. That gift is not to be confused with a natural talent. It has nothing to do with your ability to play or sing or run 100 yards in 9.2; it is a spiritual gift, some capacity that will enable you to minister to the spiritual needs of others. And God has distributed these gifts throughout the body of Christ. Every one of you, if you have acknowledged Jesus Christ as Lord, has a place in that body. You have a gift, and God wants you to know that. We don't have time to go through the gifts that are listed here -- prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, etc. I would suggest that you pick up one of Mr. Stedman's messages on Ephesians 4, in which he describes and defines these gifts carefully. But you need to know that you have one.

Secondly, God wants you to employ that gift with your whole heart. If you are serving, serve with your whole heart. If you are teaching, do it wholeheartedly. Lay hold of the indwelling life of Christ for strength, patience, and persistence, and serve with all the determination of your new humanity. The employment of that gift will result in the building up and strengthening of other believers. Thus your life will be invested wisely and well in God's sight. Your efforts will not be wasted. Your life will count, not just for time but for eternity; you never need to be afraid that you will spend your life building bird baths.

When I was a youngster growing up, whenever my father had to make a crucial decision he would say, "Well we need to drive down a peg." I never understood that expression until one day we were putting in a fence and he was laying out a line along the edge of our property. When we got to the corner of the field my father took a big piece of Bois De Arc, about 6 inches around and 6 feet long, and he drove it into the ground. "Now he said, "this is where we turn the corner; we go that way." He tied the string onto that piece of wood, and we went in another direction. Then I realized what he meant by driving down a peg. He was referring to a decisive moment in life when we make a radical change in direction. Perhaps for some of you this is that decisive moment. Now, beginning today, you want your life to count and you want to begin by presenting your body to Jesus Christ as a living sacrifice. As we pray together, perhaps in the quietness of your own heart, you would like to do that now.

Lord, it is our desire to present ourselves to you as living sacrifices, and every day to give you the right to do with us as you see fit. It is our desire to be abandoned to your word, to know it, to understand it and to believe it, and to allow it to remold our minds from within. And Father, we want to know the place of service that you have for us. We want to know what our gifts are, and employ them out of faith. We know that is your desire as well. You desire to use us. And so we submit to your authority. We ask you to rule and reign and to be in us all that you desire to be. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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