

Scripture: Romans 12:1–2

Title: Secular-Saints /Translated by Doyun Kwak

1. A Body Under the Power of Sin

August is coming to an end. The scorching heat of summer is slowly fading as it makes way for fall. When I was a child, I would sometimes complain to my mother about how hard it was to bear the summer heat. Whenever I did, she would say, “But the rice needs that blazing sunlight in order to ripen.” Under the hot summer sun, fruit and grain are ripening, and before long, the season of harvest will be here. Is your life ripening little by little as well? You haven’t given up on the hope that today can be better than yesterday, have you? We are not still wandering in the darkness, stumbling along the path of our desires, are we? Even in the darkness, are we continuing on our pilgrimage toward Jesus, the true Light? Today, I would like us to look at Romans 12, one of our lectionary readings, and reflect together on the kind of life Jesus, the true Light, desires from those of us who live in this dark world. The book of Romans shows us how those who live in sin can be born again as new people who walk toward the light. Throughout Romans, Paul repeatedly emphasizes that we are helpless sinners. Romans 3:23 says: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And Romans 3:9 makes it clear that no one is an exception: “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.” All of us are under sin. And because we are under sin, we have become separated from God and are unable to reach the glory of God. Paul openly confesses the limitations of his own flesh. He knows that, on his own, he cannot escape the powerful pull of sin. Romans 7:18 says: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” And in verse 24, he cries out: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Here, the apostle Paul makes a deeply serious confession about his own limitations. He knows what it is like to live under the control of the desires of the flesh. It is difficult to come to this kind of realization unless we have looked deeply and honestly at ourselves. This isn’t a confession you can make unless you’ve experienced real despair after trying over and over to live a genuinely good life, only to slip and fall every single time. Then, in Romans 8:7, Paul realizes that without even knowing it, he has been living as an enemy of God: “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.” He deeply realized that whenever he lived according to the desires of the flesh, it led nowhere but to despair.

2. The Proper Response of Those Who Have Received Mercy

But Paul also realized that true freedom comes when the law of the Spirit of life begins to work over our flesh, which was once ruled by the law of sin. In the end, he learned that freedom isn’t something we achieve through our own will or effort. Rather, when the law of the Spirit of life takes over, we naturally begin to experience true freedom. Romans explains to us this very power and life-changing capability of the gospel. After spending eleven long chapters explaining the power of the gospel, Paul starts Romans 12:1 with a single word: “Therefore.” Back in Romans 10:10, Paul said: “For with the heart one believes and is

justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” He emphasizes that salvation comes when we open our hearts, welcome Jesus Christ, and accept Him as our Lord and Savior. Our hearts undergo a transformation, and we are born again as Christians. But Paul wants us to know that our journey of salvation doesn’t end there. To show us how those who believe in their hearts and confess with their mouths ought to live, Paul uses that word: “Therefore.” “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God...” The people reading this letter are people who have experienced the mercy of God. They have already experienced how loving God is. Paul uses the word “therefore” because he is about to describe the kind of life that should come from someone who has experienced God’s mercy and love. In other words, what Paul is asking of us is the proper response of someone who has been deeply moved by the greatness and wonder of God’s love. So what does Paul urge us to do? “...to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” Paul is saying that those of us who have received salvation in our hearts must now offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices that are pleasing to him. Don’t live a divided faith where your body and mind are separate, or where your faith is disconnected from your daily life. Paul tells us that worship expressed through our physical bodies is the very worship God desires. The Greek word translated as “proper” , “reasonable” or “acceptable” is *logikos*. It is a word that comes from *logos*. It means something logical, reasonable, and rational. In short, offering your daily life to God is the only worship that truly makes sense. This shows us that God cares deeply about our bodies. God desires a faith that is followed by action; a faith that is expressed through obedience and through what we do with our bodies.

3. A Living Sacrifice

Think about that phrase for a moment, “a living sacrifice.” It almost sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? A sacrifice must die to be an offering. If it is alive, how can it be a sacrifice? However, Paul tells us to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. In the Old Testament, every single sacrifice was a dead offering. Whether it was a burnt offering or a fellowship offering, the dead body of an animal was offered to God. But the Book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus ended that Old Testament system once and for all by offering His own body. Since the resurrection of Jesus, worship is no longer about bringing dead animal sacrifices. It has become about offering ourselves, our own living bodies. This is the kind of worship expected of those who have received God’s mercy. Dedicating our lives is the natural response of anyone moved by God’s grace. “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16) Paul understood our very bodies to be the temple where God lives. There is no separate place where worship alone takes place. Our bodies themselves are the sanctuary. That is how deeply God cares about our bodies. People who have been reshaped by the grace of the Lord begin to see the world

and the people around them through God's eyes. And as they do, they begin to desire not only to see as God sees, but to become His hands and feet in the world. Paul describes believers as people who have died to sin. They no longer surrender themselves to the desires of the body. Instead, they gladly offer their bodies to God as servants of righteousness. So, a living sacrifice means living a life of worship in which we use our living bodies to become the hands and feet of God. Have you experienced the mercy of God? Have you experienced the love of God that is wider than the sea and stronger than the waves? Then the proper response of those who have experienced the mercy of Christ is to worship with their bodies by offering themselves as living sacrifices. This is the true and proper worship you are to offer. Faith is about the way we live. It is not only about what is in our hearts. A faith that is disconnected from life is not a complete faith. In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther described the meaning of baptism this way: "The old Adam dies, and a new person rises." In other words, the life of a believer is a life of daily baptism. Christians are people who say goodbye to their old selves every day and put on the new self. When we live this way, our ordinary, everyday lives become worship. We can see, then, that there are two stages in the life of faith. First, we receive the grace that God has already prepared for us. Then, once we have received and experienced that grace, we respond with joy and gratitude. We allow the desires of our bodies to be purified, and we begin to live as the hands and feet of God.

4. Do Not Conform to This Age

In verse 2, Paul describes the kind of life that is required of those who have experienced the mercy of God: "Do not conform to the pattern of this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what the will of God is—what is good, pleasing, and perfect." We have been saved by the grace of Christ, but we are still living with our feet planted in this world. And in order to survive in this world, it can seem only natural to follow the ways of the age in which we live. Paul's words in verse 2 may even seem impossible. Many people become discouraged before they even begin. They assume that this kind of life is impossible, and so they give up. But there is something you need to understand. If we do not make the will of God the Primary Goal of our lives, something else will immediately take its place. If the will of God does not occupy our hearts, then the patterns and values of the world will take over that space instead. There is only one way to live without being swept along by the ways of this age. We must discern the will of God and follow it. This passage becomes especially interesting when we look at it from the perspective of formation. The world presents us with a certain mold, a certain framework for how we are supposed to live. Paul calls that framework "the pattern of this age." It is the mold of the world, and it is constantly trying to shape us to fit into it. If we are not discerning, before we even realize what is happening, we begin to take on its shape. We

find ourselves being formed by the patterns of this world. But the Christian life is not about forcing ourselves to fit into the world's mold. Instead, the transformation that begins within our hearts should begin to reformat the world around us. The world should not be changing us. We should be changing the world. There is a very great difference between the two. When water moves because of a difference in concentration, we call it osmosis, or osmotic pressure. We are called to bring that kind of holy osmosis into the world. We are to influence and change the world around us. We must not allow the process to be reversed. We must not let the world reshape us through a kind of reverse osmosis. The Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer described Christians who live in secular society while working to transform that society from within as "Secular Saints." True Christians live in the world, but they are not stained by the world. They participate fully in life in the secular world, and yet they are able to overcome the world rather than being overcome by it.

5. People Who Imagine a Different Way of Life

As I have said many times, believers are people who imagine a different way of life. We aren't here to be tamed by mainstream culture. We are called to live with the clearly revealed will of God burned into our hearts. That is why we need the wisdom and insight to see through the age in which we live. Many people go through life without even realizing that they have absorbed the values of the age they live in. In our age, many people spend their lives chasing the mirage of happiness. What did the serpent say when it tempted the first human beings in the Garden of Eden? "You can become like God." That same desire to live like God is still at work in people today. People long for a life where others listen to them and do what they say. They want to do whatever they want and have whatever they want, without limits. They want a life where nothing is beyond their reach. And in today's capitalist society, there is something that seems to promise exactly that kind of life: money. People run after money until they are out of breath. Some of you may be thinking, "Pastor, here you go talking about this topic again." But I keep coming back to this because it is so important for us to discern the patterns of our age. The way capitalism works is actually quite simple. Our culture tells us that we need to stand out from everyone else. And once people fall under the spell of that message, they begin to want things other people do not have, things that are difficult for most people to get. We begin to think that scarcity, having something rare that others cannot have, is what makes us valuable. Capitalism seeks to manipulate the desires already within our hearts. Through advertising, it makes us feel that things we do not really need are things we absolutely have to have. Advertising stands at the front line of capitalism's effort to shape our desires. It tells us, "If you have this, you will be worth more." In modern capitalism, a company that simply studies what people already want and then supplies it will not survive. Companies try to create demand. They try to make us want things we did not want before. In other words, they shape and manipulate

our desires. And to satisfy those desires, we need money. So we keep ourselves busy, running after the money we need to get the things we have been taught to desire. But while we are running after money, we have forgotten many things we should never have forgotten. We have forgotten that we are made in the image of God. And we have forgotten our neighbors, who are also made in the image of God. When we spend our lives chasing after desires that have been shaped for us, we begin to look at our neighbors with fear and suspicion. Because we are so driven by the desire to set ourselves apart from everyone else, we have lost the joy of being together. And when we fail to discern what is happening, we find ourselves helplessly pulled along by the ways of the world.

6. Discern the Will of God

If we are going to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices that are pleasing to him, our minds must be renewed. The direction of our lives has to change. We are weak human beings living in fragile bodies. We cannot simply fight the world and win. We cannot simply fight our desires and overcome them by our own strength. Does that mean there is no hope for us? Paul says that this becomes possible when we live under the law of the Spirit of life. The Holy Spirit gives our hearts a new direction. We cannot fight against sin and defeat it through our own strength. Sometimes taking off the old self seems impossible. But when the Holy Spirit renews our minds, the life that once seemed impossible begins to become possible. When I was a child, I spent a lot of time playing outside, so I was always getting scraped up and coming home with cuts and bruises. Sometimes a large scab would form over a wound. And I could never seem to leave it alone. I was always tempted to pick at it and pull it off. But if you leave it alone, something happens. As new skin begins to grow underneath, the old, hardened scab eventually falls away on its own. The same is true of our old self. When following the will of God begins to feel joyful and meaningful to us, the other things that once seemed so exciting and once held us captive begin to lose their hold on us naturally. That is why Paul tells us to renew our minds. The change that begins within our hearts eventually breaks through to the outside. It begins to change the way we live, and eventually, it begins to change the world around us. God is pleased when we offer our bodies as living sacrifices. He does not want our faith to stop with what we confess with our mouths. He desires a faith that moves our hands and feet. Those who desire to offer their bodies to God as living sacrifices must learn to: “discern what God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will is.” If we want to live according to the will of God, we need discernment. Discernment is one of the most important and necessary virtues in the life of faith. There are people who say they are living a life of faith, but they are still being pulled along by the old patterns of their lives. We live in a world where truth and falsehood, light and darkness, are all mixed together. Without discernment, we can easily become a target for evil. Prayer and Scripture are essential spiritual practices for Christians who want to grow in

discernment. Through the Word we read every morning, we can learn to discern what is happening in our own hearts, and we can also learn to discern the world around us. Recently, I heard that a movement has begun among the teachers and parents in our infant and toddler ministry, as well as among our young adults. Through the Daily Reading Bible that we share along with the lectionary readings, they have begun sharing the heart of God with one another. I hope this kind of movement will begin in every small group in our church. If we are going to discern the age in which we live and discern the will of God, then living in the Word is essential. The desires that the world creates and feeds within us leave us restless and distracted. They take away our courage to stop. People today have a hard time simply sitting still with nothing to do. But not many of us realize that sometimes the strength that keeps the wheels of life turning is found precisely in those moments when we stop, when we become still, and even when we allow ourselves to be bored. When my heart is restless, one spiritual practice I often turn to is silent prayer. I turn off the lights and, in the darkness and silence, I seek the Lord who is our Light. I quiet my desires and simply wait for the will of the Lord to take root within me. We often do not have the patience to wait for new skin to grow underneath and for the old scab to fall away on its own. In that sense, silent prayer can become an important spiritual practice. It teaches us to wait for God and to bring the rhythm of our lives into step with God's time. The season is coming when the grain, ripened under the blazing sun, will bow its head. I pray that we too will receive God's light shining into this dark world and continue to grow and mature as Christians. And in the name of the Lord, I bless you and pray that we may become God's people who please Him by offering our bodies in worship through the way we live each day.