

A Sermon for DaySpring  
by Eric Howell  
*Worship, Service, and Work*  
Romans 12.1-8  
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In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, St. Paul appeals to Christians, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Paul knows instinctively what is at stake in using language like this. For his 1<sup>st</sup> century audience, sacrifice wasn't a vague idea. The Roman Christians, both Jew and Gentile knew very well that sacrifice meant a death offered to God. They'd all seen temple sacrifices and knew that a sacrifice was serious business. They may not have understood exactly what it meant to be a living sacrifice, but they knew what sacrifice was: Paul wants Christians to be all-in.

And that reminds me of the old Texas high school football coach who looked at his team, down big at halftime, and said to them "Boys, I need you to be committed. Some of you are just involved. You've got to be committed. It's like ham and eggs. The chicken is involved, but the pig is committed." If Paul were a Texas high school football coach, he'd be saying something like that in Romans 12. There's a big difference between being involved and being committed. Christ calls us to be committed.

That's a big ask. And Paul knows it. Listen to the language that he uses to make that kind of ask. It's not guilt language, it's invitation. It's an invitation to give as much of ourselves as we can to something bigger than each of us is individually.

*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters.* Not, I command you.

*By the mercies of God.* Not by the condemnation of God.

*To present your bodies.* Notice the agency you have in this. You present your bodies.

*As a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* Paul exalts this as a high and holy calling, to be honored with nothing less than our spirituality. If you're going to give your life, and you've only got one of them, and we all give our lives to something, it ought to be something worth giving your life to.

Romans 12:1 calls this your *spiritual worship*, or in some translations your *reasonable service*. That sounds very different. The reason that sounds so different is that the meaning of the Greek word evolved over time, and so English translators are having to choose what can best represents the meaning of the word to us. It's an interesting history.

The word is *latreia* which originally in Greek meant work for hire or for pay. It was the word for the man who gave his strength to an employer for the pay the employer would give to him. It is not slavery. We read about the terrible Jewish experience of slavery in Exodus 1 this morning. Slavery is what a laboring person is forced to give under compulsion and threat of suffering. A slave is owned and oppressed. A latreian is hired and paid a just wage for a day's labor. The voluntary nature of *latreia* evolved the meaning of the word into to serve and then later, more

broadly: that to which a person gives his or her whole life. Eventually it came to be used of service to God. That's the way it's used in the Bible. It is always used of service to God.

Some translators, as you may notice if you have a stack of Bibles in front of you or a Bible app, bring it into English as service others as worship. And this difference is a very significant thing. On one hand, in our language, service and worship mean two very different things. Worship is the thing you do on Sunday morning that includes singing some songs, praying some prayers, hearing a sermon, reading scripture, perhaps receiving communion. Service is what you might do other times as part of your faith: serving in the food kitchen, tutoring children, building a hospital in rural Africa. Folks at DaySpring may think of annual Chart signups and commitments which begins today, in fact. Our service is mowing the grass, cleaning the bathrooms, caring for babies and so forth. So, we tend to think of all of this as two related but different parts of our Christians lives: worship and service.

Interestingly though, we do tend to put them together in one way, at least. We call the thing we do on Sunday morning a "worship service." Well, in the country where I pastored, they called it preachin'. You went to Sunday School at 10, and then, you went to preachin' at 11. In some high churches, they call it a "liturgy", but that brings us full circle. Liturgy comes from the Greek word for the work of the people. So, again, even with a different word, if you dig back far enough you see that the word for worship, service, and work all blending together. It's only the limitations of English and the limitations of our culture and imagination that has split them apart.

I think we're accustomed to putting the pieces back together from one direction. We're accustomed to seeing our worship as our spiritual work. What do Christians do? One thing they do is worship God. God is worthy of our praise, and we need to give it. We need a place and time to come together as one and sing and pray and confess our sins and confess our faith and hear scripture and preachin' and be renewed for the work that is to come in the week ahead. When DaySpring began over 25 years ago, that was at the heart of the whole venture, and still is. Worship. Worship that is renewing and life giving. We're in a season, of course, when that has been hard on all of us, but thanks to a number of folks who figured out the technology side of things, we're able to be together virtually, at least, until we can come together again in person, hopefully before too long. This is a great joy to us. I've heard it said that American's lives have become so fractured that a regular worship attender now is considered anyone who attends worship on average twice per month. Being in worship 50% of the time is now considered regular and active, and that was before pandemic scattered us apart. I get that, I really do. But also, we lose something in losing the discipline and rhythm of weekly worship. I think this is a moment to encourage a full-throated commitment to worship as an anchor in our week's rhythm.

And yet, this is not what Paul is talking about in Romans 12. Or at least this is not all he's talking about. Worship is our spiritual work, but Paul's reminding us, too, that our work—our service-- is also a way of worship. True worship is the offering to God of your body and all that you do every day with it. Real worship isn't just a Sunday morning hour; it is the offering of everyday

life to God. This is so important to hear at a time like this. I think we're at a moment in this year when the volume, pace, and anxiety of daily life is about to ramp up. For some people, it couldn't come soon enough. Bring it on. For others, getting out of bed in the morning is challenge enough. I hope you'll hear this, and I hope you'll take it as encouragement: your daily work *is* service to God—it is worship. The sacrifices you are making is spiritual worship.

If this sounds hopelessly romantic given the job you're in or the work you have to do, I understand. Not everyone has a job they love. Not everyone has a job that is easy to connect with or to easily translate Christian virtue. Years ago, I had a mentor who I thought was at the top of the world said to me, You know: even now 80% of what I do, I do because I have to; I do it so I get to do the 20% that I want to. Who among us wouldn't want those ratios reversed in our work? Yet, work doesn't always conform to our personal desires. I'm thinking of three examples, but there are many others.

Thinking about school: Classes don't always conform to our interests. Somewhere along the way all students have to take classes they don't want to take and work on projects they don't want to do, for a purpose they don't understand. They do them anyway, and some learn along the way to appreciate the work as wisdom more than they understood at first.

Thinking about life in pandemic: How we make it through a pandemic doesn't always conform to the way we wish it would. People going out in public these days have to wear face coverings they don't want to wear, for purposes they may not still understand, as instructed by leadership whose values they may not share. They wear them anyway, and some figure out along the way that the face covering in this season isn't a form of oppression; it's neighbor care. Some might even call it a form of love. For all of you who have just come to Waco for school or for work or to visit the shiplap Shangri-la. Welcome. We're really glad you're here. Now please, wear your mask, help protect this beautiful community for everyone.

Thinking about church work: How we serve the church isn't always easy and convenient especially when we are busy and overwhelmed. Yet, people who are so busy, feeling overwhelmed, still volunteer their time to take part in the church's work. And many of them will find life in it, more than they thought possible, and they find friends through it, more than they thought they even needed. It's been true since the doors opened around here and will be again now even this year. And maybe even more because of this year.

I'm thinking about all those things. All those ways our lives are, in the totality of them, living sacrifices as worship to God. As I do, I have a kind of prayer for you today--a kind of blessing or wish for you. It's in the form of a story from Annie Dillard in her memoir of growing up in 1950s, called *An American Childhood*. Apparently, Dillard was something of a firecracker of a little girl growing up in a time when little girls were supposed to be made of sugar and spice and everything nice. Little Annie Dillard was the spice. "What can we make of the inexpressible joy of children?" She asks. As she recalls her own childhood, "There was joy in concentration, and the whole world afforded an inexhaustible wealth of projects to concentrate on. There was joy in effort, and the world resisted effort to just the right degree and yielded to it at last. People

cut Mount Rushmore into faces; they chipped here and there for years. People slowed the spread of yellow fever; they sprayed the Isthmus of Panama puddle by puddle. Effort alone I loved. Some days I would have been happy to push a pole around a threshing floor like an ox, for the pleasure of moving the heavy stone and watching my knees rise in turn.”

Dillard’s ode to the inexpressible joy of effort, to the meaning of good work reminds me of the story by the poet David Whyte. Before he committed his life to poetry, Whyte was depressed, despondent, and worn out. His friend, a Benedictine monk named Brother David, had joined him for a dinner. Down and out, Whyte blurted out during the evening, “Speak to me about exhaustion. Tell me about exhaustion.” Brother David said a life-changing thing. He said, “You know the antidote to exhaustion isn’t rest. It’s wholeheartedness.”

That’s the kind of prayer Annie Dillard’s story is for us today. She finishes her story, “Just once I wanted a task that required all the joy I had.” (107) Don’t you? Don’t you still? Just want a task that requires all the joy you have?

Now that’s a prayer. A prayer for you, for this season. That you find yourself at work doing something that requires all the joy that is inside you, even more than you know you have.

Despite the kind of somber, over-serious way we sometimes talk about being a living sacrifice, this is at the heart of the life we’re talking about. The kind of life in which worship is our work, and our work is worship. Everything has its place, and everything belongs. Or if it doesn’t yet, there’s still the prayer that it will. Because everything we’re talking about here is bathed in words like mercy and grace and faith, and all things work for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose. We are called to risk something big for something good.

And we remember--and how could we ever forget?--Jesus looks right at the clumsiest, most unlikely one among the brood of those young men gathered around him and says to him, “You’re a rock, and on you I’m gonna build my church.” He’s still building. Jesus is still building every day. Building his church out of the rough and uneven stones of our lives, and somehow, as he chips on us and shapes us and forms us and puts us together with one another, somehow the miracle is, like a master-carpenter joins them together. Until all becomes one. Worship and work, heart and mind, faith and love, and we are transformed in joy. This is my prayer for you today.

Amen.