

Practical Christianity

Part 1

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[00:00:01] There are certain scriptures that one tends to avoid because they are so well known, so often gone over, that the temptation is to say, what possibly can there be said on these verses that hasn't been said before?

What new slant could there possibly be that will enable us to maintain concentration for about thirty minutes?

And yet, again and again, we feel compelled to look at some well-known words in order that they might come to us in present power under the leading of the Lord. Certainly I feel compelled to read with renewed emphasis the first two verses of Romans 12.

[00:01:11] I have only once ever compared notes before a meeting with another brother with whom I was in tandem. This was in preaching the gospel about thirty years ago, and it led to utter disaster. This means that after the powerful challenge that we had on these profound truths that we've been considering today so far, it comes to me with renewed emphasis that the verses that the Lord has led me to read are those which we should be rightfully engaged with tonight.

I want, very simply, to draw your attention to three basic questions that I would suggest [00:02:09] we all need to face relative to these two verses, Romans 12, verses 1 and 2.

The first one is, what is the main force of the passage?

Secondly, whatever challenge it brings, have I faced up to it?

And thirdly, do I continue to live in the light of what I know to be true?

Putting it even more basically, what is it?

Have I done it?

Do I continue in it?

[00:03:02] I'd like, first of all, to say what I've concluded after much meditation over the years, no doubt in concert with most of us here, but my experience of keeping company with 200 believers at any one time is that one need not apologize for saying well-known things.

In a company this size, there is most likely to be at least one person who hasn't heard it put quite this way before, and there may be many more, while having gone over it, haven't really faced up to the issue. And for everyone in that kind of situation, there are 10 or 20 of us who think perhaps we know what the force of the passage is, but perhaps it's long since lost its power [00:04:04] over the lives that we live before the Lord.

What then does the scripture teach?

See this.

In the light of what I have learned, of the mercy of God towards me and for me, have I come to this crisis in my life and experience?

In the face of all that he's done for me, have I come to this crisis point where I'm willing to say everything that I am, everything that I do, everything that I have is to be handed over once and for all to the God who has shown such mercy towards me?

[00:05:13] Without going into the details of the text, it can be acknowledged that the words that are used are such to bring us to this inevitable conclusion that the only right response from a true appreciation of the mercy of God is commitment, full commitment to the God who has saved us, and that commitment is total and it's irrevocable.

We have considered today already, and rightly so, that the measure in which or to which [00:06:06] the truth of God has had an effect upon us can be readily seen by the life it has produced.

No accident that in the portion that we have read, the address to the Ephesian elders, that their attention was drawn, that the manner of life of the apostle fully backed up all that he said to them. Now I want to say this before I go further.

It's not a matter of having such an understanding of the scriptures that we can give lectures about it or that we could talk more clearly about the truth of God. Scriptures abound which reinforce the right conclusion that right belief leads to right behavior.

[00:07:10] The truth of God, rightly understood, produces a life that honors God.

Scriptures abound which emphasize that again and again, and this is one of them, certainly. And we hope to go into a few of the implications of these verses. But before we do, I would like to draw attention to one of two situations which may well apply to each of us who are here today. Maybe that some of us feel limited in the response that we can make before a savior God because we feel we cannot understand the scriptures. We are not such students of the word of God as we would like to be, and however hard we [00:08:02] try, we cannot come to a clear understanding that would enable us to talk about them clearly. I am assured that there are many simple, real believers who, without being able to give an orderly, detailed treatise on the things involved in Romans 12, verses 1 and 2, and yet their lives demonstrate that they are living in the light of that basic appreciation that God who has moved towards them in mercy, that the only right response is that the life that we are privileged to live here in responsibility until the coming of the Lord has to be entirely consistent with the gospel we have believed. [00:09:01] Again I say it, there may well be many of us who, while we cannot give an exposition or talk about these verses, demonstrate in our lives that they are being put into practice.

Now that is a happy thing.

But the other situation may well also be true. There may well be many of us in a company like this who, as soon as the verses are mentioned, can come out with things that are right, things that need to be stated again and again. We have everything in its right place. We can give an orderly exposition of what the verses mean, and yet it is patent that our lives cannot be subjected to the kind of scrutiny that the eye of a holy God demands. Both are necessary.

[00:10:01] Right belief, well grounded in holy scripture, and the kind of lifestyle that is commensurate with that.

Let us commence as the apostle does here.

I suppose in summary we could say he's appealing to the force of the truth of God expounded certainly in the first eight chapters, and then after the little digression showing how Jew as well as Gentile will ultimately be brought in on the line of mercy leading at the end of chapter 11 to that wonderful doxology or the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God and so on.

And then appealing on that ground, he says, I beseech you therefore brethren by the mercy, the compassion of God.

[00:11:04] We know from Titus that our Christian life began as the recipients of the mercy of God. We are saved by the mercy of God.

We know that as our lives are lived here before the Lord, we are assured that goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life.

And happily we are reminded by Jude that being translated out of this responsible situation at the coming of the Lord, the final act which translates us is looked at by Jude as an act of mercy, awaiting the mercy of our God. Mercy all the way.

And Paul says to the Romans, in the light of that mercy, which of us is there that doesn't [00:12:03] appreciate the mercy of God, not by any works of righteousness that we have done, but according to his mercy he has saved us. Well, this is the lever for the plain exhortation that comes to us. Now, again let us say, we may well understand the bearing of the words. We may well have heard lectures many times on these things. But the crisis point is this, the challenge today is this, have I ever, in the light of what I have appreciated of the mercy of God, come to this point where I have said if that's what he's done for me, I'm going to hand myself over to him once and for all, lock, stop and barrel, to be available to him as it pleases him and not me.

[00:13:04] Now, again, in case we don't get time later on, let us say, yes, have we come to that? May it be that we say, yes, I've come to that crisis point in the history of my soul. I've handed myself over once and for all.

Reference has been made to the passage of time. With the passage of time, since we first trusted Christ as Savior, since we came to this recognition that there was only one reasonable conclusion for us to come to, that if he'd done all that for us, there is only one outcome, and that is full, total, irrevocable commitment to do the will of God while we are left here upon earth with the passage of

time. [00:14:06] Since we first came to that conclusion, has there been any slipping away in the daily practice of our lives? Has there been any giving up? Has there been any departure from that conclusion which was right then and is just as right today?

Now, that's the main force of these verses, but let us look at some of the detail. I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that ye present, well, we've spoken of, this is the word which justifies the common construction put upon it. This is not a daily thing. There is a daily challenge in Christianity, but this is a once and for all transaction entered into realistically, intelligently, as a result of meditating upon the mercy of [00:15:08] God, that ye present your bodies.

Scripture distinguishes for us between spirit, soul, and body.

We do well to seek out those scriptures which distinguish the sphere proper to the spirit, the soul, the body, and to see the care with which the Holy Spirit distinguishes and yet brings them all together. Other scriptures, and while perhaps we might look into these verses and see that which is relative to the spirit, the soul, and the body, even if we don't go that far, there is certainly this, there is that which is relative to the material part of our being, [00:16:07] the body, and there is that which is relative to the immaterial part of the being. And there are other scriptures which seem perhaps to put spirit and soul on the one side and the body on the other. Now for those, and let us again bring the challenge to our hearts, have we all been the recipients of the mercy of God exercised towards us in the giving of his son to be our savior?

If so, our souls are saved for eternity, but here, a present aspect of our salvation, the apostle brings before us that there is a need to present our bodies a living sacrifice.

[00:17:08] Our bodies are the vessels or the vehicles of the expression of that which the spirit and soul appreciates.

It is through the body that we are enabled to serve the will of God here upon earth as long as we are left here, and it is our bodies that we are invited, that we are constrained, that is demanded of us as a living sacrifice.

The people of God upon earth for many centuries have been used to the delivering up of sacrifices to God, the delivering of the life even unto death.

There have been those who for the sake of the testimony have delivered themselves up [00:18:03] even unto death.

Stephen for one was faithful unto death, and he, Stephanus, crown, undoubtedly receives the crown of life in answer to his faithfulness. But this kind of sacrifice enjoined upon us here is not something which means our life of responsibility is ended upon earth and we depart to be with Christ, which is far, far better, but rather that kind of sacrifice that means every moment of every day until the coming of the Lord, we make ourselves available to him in every department of our lives.

We are good at encouraging children to enter into good commitments. [00:19:01] We teach them good words to say and to sing, but let us allow the force of simple words we encourage the children to take upon our lips, bear with them the force of our bodies being a living sacrifice. And it's when we come down to this kind of thing that we can measure ourselves against the plumb line of Holy Scripture.

What do we say to the children? We encourage them to sing words like, be careful, little feet, where you go.

Be careful, little hands, what you do.

Increasingly, be careful, little ears, what you hear.

Be careful, little eyes, what you watch.

Present your bodies, a living sacrifice unto God.

[00:20:03] All that will be acceptable to him. If in the smallest details of our lives, where we go, who we go with, what we do, the kind of thing that occupies our time, the kind of ambition that we set for ourselves and our families, it's in this kind of detail that we can have the opportunity to demonstrate whether we are prepared to present our bodies a living sacrifice.

Holy, sanctified, set apart to God, holy, acceptable unto God.

For we rejoice in the earlier chapters of this and other epistles, where we exult together that we are not only accepted by God, but that we are acceptable to God as to our eternal [00:21:09] standing before him. This is what the meditation upon the mercies of God, the compassions of God towards us leads us to rejoice in.

The only proper response to that is that we live in such a way that in our daily practice, we are acceptable unto him, the one who has made us accepted in the beloved one because of the exercise of his mercy towards us, which is your reasonable, rational, intelligent service.

At the interval, one or two of us were conversing about Christian writings, and the eye and the ear as vehicles for the understanding and comment was made upon a book with the [00:22:09] title Through the Eye to the Heart. In other words, through the eye, we receive transmission of information in one way or another.

It passes into the mind so that the will is submitted. It goes into the heart in order that our hearts might be affected, but it doesn't stay there. The word of God, having had its own effect upon us, moves through the eye, the mind, the will, the heart, and ultimately finds expression through the feet and the hands and the members of these bodies. A very similar kind of thing is said in chapter six, isn't it? How can we possibly, living in a defiling world, keep clear of all the sin and the defilement [00:23:07] that there is round about us? Therefore the apostle says in chapter six, there's only one way. Yield yourself once and for all to God and yield your members daily, constantly, consistently as members for righteousnesses, righteous acts before the world and before the eye of a merciful God, which is your reasonable service.

It is this word reasonable or intelligent which encourages me to make a kind of statement which perhaps needs examination. I come originally from a part of the country where very frequently we were led to understand [00:24:04] that anything that began or passed through the mind would be tainted by the God of this world, and there is always the danger. But a twin danger was that we might have responded to that by saying, well, if that's what happens when we exercise our minds, let us not be on the line of treating things reasonably intelligently in our minds, let us always go for heart

matters rather than head matters. Well, scripture and time have brought the conclusion that if our hearts are to be rightly affected, it is only in the light of a right appreciation in the presence of God by the exercise of our minds.

The gospel which says so much about heart matters, the epistle to the Philippians, is [00:25:02] also the epistle which tells us so much about the need and the exercise of the mind. We need to think these things through.

As we think them through, there is only one possible conclusion. The only right service for God is that which is made possible by handing ourselves over once and for all to the God by His mercy has saved us, your reasonable, intelligent service. I suppose I have to say it with care, but I've come to this conclusion. This phrase, which is your intelligent service, could well be expressed like this. It is an intellectual decision of the renewed mind. [00:26:01] Scripture says, ye have the mind of Christ, ye have the thinking faculty of the Christ, you have the way of thinking of the Christ, and when we exercise the capacity, the God-endowed capacity to think with our renewed minds, it leads us to the inevitable conclusion that we must hand ourselves over, spirit, soul, and body, to be devoted to the service of the will of God here upon earth. And then in verse 2, and we must pass on, be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. In case there be any who haven't heard this before, let us recognize again that what is considered in the first phrase is this.

[00:27:01] Even for Christians, there is the grave danger that we will fashion our lives by what is round about us.

Our lives taking shape by the environment in which we live here in this world. Be not conformed to this world, to this age, the spirit of the age in which we live. Recently, I was in a locality where something sad was going on amongst Christians, and with a shrug of the shoulders, one of the local brethren said, well, I suppose it's the spirit of the age.

It may well be, but that's every reason why we need to exercise our renewed minds and to avoid being characterized the way we meet, the way we dress, the way we spend our time, [00:28:03] the way in which gifts are encouraged to express themselves. All these things could so easily bear the stamp, the character of the spirit of the age. When we bear in mind that scripture says most plainly that Satan himself is both the prince of this age and the God of this age, if we are governed by the spirit or the fashions of this age in whatever sphere of our lives, we are allowing ourselves to be controlled and motivated by the constant opposer of Christ, Satan himself.

Be not conformed to this world. Certainly, the force of this would affect me in what way I allow my feet to go, what I put my hands to, how I use my eyes and ears and all the natural senses, and here we are [00:29:01] turned away from that which is fashioned from the outside, from the environment, and again much more might be said about that, but be ye transformed.

As others have well said, not conformed, not even reformed, but transformed, and again Here we have a word which tells us that the fashion of our lives, the way that we live, rather than taking character from things round about, is the life that's produced by an inward transforming power, and what does the scripture say?

Renewed by the renewing of your mind.

Yes, we have been renewed.

[00:30:01] There is a once and for all renewal.

No student of the epistle to the Romans can go through the earlier part of the epistle without coming to the right conclusion that there is nothing about us, of ourselves, which can be used in the service of our God, not what we are in ourselves. We need the old everything about us to be brought intelligently under the scrutiny of the truth of God, and to realize God's assessment of all that pertains to ourselves as having been judged, brought to a judicial end in the cross of Christ. We need to meditate upon the cross of Christ and all that it means. [00:31:03] The love that was expressed, the righteousness which was shown, the grace that abounds to us because of it, and all the assessment of a holy, righteous God on all that we are in ourselves as having been brought to an end in the cutting off of the Christ.

Anything that there is for good is that which God has implanted within us, and we've been given a completely new way of thinking. It is that which leads us to the right conclusions from the God who's shown his mercy towards us. And how does he end the verse? That ye may prove.

There is a kind of proof which is a considered judgment of the mind. [00:32:01] There is that kind of proof which is theoretical, but there is that kind of proof, and this is the proof here, which is a practical demonstration of the effect of what we know to be true. That we may prove in our own experience, in our homes, in our studies, in our work, in our fellowship, in our witness, in our service to God and to man, there is that which we can prove experimentally, which is the alone product of the meditations and the intelligent conclusions of the renewed mind.

Now this is progressive, but how does it start? We may well come back to where we started, and I realize that everything that's been said is extremely basic and simple. [00:33:04] How possibly if for the first time tonight I have come to this conclusion that in the face of all that God has done for me, the only right thing for me to do, the only right way of thinking, is to hand myself over completely, irrevocably, once and for all, to be devoted to the service of God here upon earth. What should be the first thing that I should be doing? How can I find expression of this seemingly profound thing?

We've trusted Christ as Savior.

We are not under law.

We are under grace.

[00:34:01] But in our immediate circumstances, there are things that we know are right. Things that we know we should be doing again in our home lives, in our relationships with our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters.

There are things that we know are right in our relationship with them. Very often we don't do it.

We are not proving that good and acceptable and perfect will of God if there are things that we know that are right, and we are not doing them. In our local assembly, there are things that we know we should be doing and saying, and we are not doing them. There are things that we know we should not be doing and not saying, and we insist on [00:35:01] doing them.

Oh, let us commence with what we know is right.

Let us do the right thing in every sphere of our lives, and we will begin to prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

When the Lord Jesus was here upon earth, he was able to say that from the outset he was committed to putting into effect the will of God, the will of him that sent him. At this present time, the will of God is to be put into effect.

The will of God is to come to light in the practical righteousness of the lives of those who appreciate the mercy of God. What a tremendous privilege that we have been left here for other reasons and for this, [00:36:05] that through our bodies, in our lives, we can give expression to that which is well pleasing to God. May well be that there are those here who have been hearing these things, saying these things 40, 50, 60 years and more.

To what extent do they continue to be true of us if ever we have come to this conclusion? I would close with the challenge again. What is the main drift? What is the moral power of these verses?

Have I done it?

Have I handed myself over once and for all? I have owned, I have confessed the name of Jesus as Lord.

Do I live in such a way that it is apparent to all that the Lordship of Christ is paramount [00:37:09] in every department of my life?

Have I come to that conclusion? Have I put it into practice? Has there been any waning of its force, its moral power over the life that I live? Scripture says, we look, we love his appearing. We long for the day when the will of God will be seen in all its universal power in and through the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we shall be with him then. If our lives will not be hid then, our lives will be manifested when he is manifested. Oh, but there is the opportunity now for the will of God to be manifested in the lives [00:38:03] that we live, if only we have a right appreciation of the extent and the character of his mercy towards us.