

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ROMAN 12:1-2

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### ABSTRACT

The distinction between one who believes in Christ and the world characterizes Jesus' earthly ministry. The identity of Jesus and His disciples is what makes this distinction glaring. This is simply what Paul further establishes in Romans 12:1-2. Paul begins the letter to the Church in Rome with clear explanation on how humans have been cut up in the realm of God's saving grace. He further explained Christians as people who is righteous not by tribal affinity (as many Jew boasts), but by faith in Christ. The text understudy is where Paul addresses an important question, why a Christian must live a transformed life. If he stopped there, the charge to would not have been incomplete. But he further explained how to live that transformed life. Therefore, the life of a Christian must reflect what the will of God is; good, pleasing and perfect – because the life of a Christian is offered to God as a living sacrifice – holy and acceptable.

**KEYWORDS:** Christian, God, Paul, Sacrifice.

### INTRODUCTION

The text understudy is Paul's statement in His letter to the Church in Rome. Paul redraws the boundaries of the people of God; Jew and Gentiles. He explained that the covenant promised to Abraham's seed is not determined by physical descent or works of the law in flesh; rather, determined by gracious call which knows no social bounds. Paul presents a gospel open to all who believe (1:16-17). A sketch of a way of living with particular reference to critical issues which confronted the Roman congregations is the task of Paul's letter (Dunn, 2002; 705). With the people of God thus redefined, a rule of life needs to be formulated; "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect". These two verses serve as an introduction to the rest of the main division (12:1-15:13), the theme of which they set forth. As the key to the right understanding of the sections which follow, they require a careful study. Thus, this article analyzes Romans 12:1-12 and its relevance for Christians.

### Background and Structure of the Text

The preaching about the resurrection of Jesus Christ sets the Early Church in limelight. Jesus' disciples have scattered abroad due to persecution but did not stop proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus whom they believed. The gospel was not limited to the Jewish environs; it penetrated the threshold of the gentiles. It was as good as Jesus' ministry was without break; the disciples effectively carry on the work. This includes the person of Apostle Paul, who ministry to the Gentiles was far-reaching. This he reiterated to the Church in Rome (1:16-17). The universal nature of the Gospel is so vivid in Paul's mission, not in mere words; but in action. He travelled as a far as Macedonia and Asia. He demonstrated the earnest desire to visit the Church in Rome in this letter (1:9-15; 15:23-32). Romans 12:1-2 forms an important part of this epistle to the Church in Rome. Here, Paul demonstrated the practical application of righteousness through faith in Christ. Paul employs a powerful progression of message which intensively summarizes all his intended word (12:1-15:13) in the first two verses of Romans 12. The presented structure (A-B-C-B-A) forms the frame work of the analysis of the text.

- A** I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God
- 
- B** to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God
- 
- C** which is your spiritual worship.
- 
- B** Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind
- 
- A** that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect

As seen, the process of transformation begins with God. However, man's role and participation is of great importance – though still helped by God. Paul made it clear that 'God will not do for a man what man should do for himself.' Paul addresses two important issues in this text; why should a believer be transformed? How can a believer be transformed? After exploring the need for believer's transformation – a clear picture of Christian's identity; Paul did not leave the other issue hanging. Instead, he made the procedure completed by explaining how Christians can be transformed. There is an expected mode for Christians so as to attain the result Paul stated – "that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect". The practical living of Roman Christian was the ultimate concern of Paul in this letter – a great eye opener to make Christians sure of their exact person in Jesus Christ. This is what distinguishes Christians in this world – 'we are all Living Sacrifices'.

### Analysis of the Text

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God this is true worship.<sup>2</sup> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is his good, pleasing and perfect will (NIV).

Paul began his words to the Church in Rome in this portion of his letter with 'therefore' suggesting the need to step back into the previous section to get the big picture of the entire book. The background of the text in the preceding section of this article already provides details that somewhat summarizes why Paul made use of οὖν - 'therefore' to usher in his words here. Romans 1:17 encapsulates the theme of the entire book – talking about 'righteousness from God'. The "I" which commenced the statement refers to Paul speaking to the people; this is suggestive of his person as an Apostle of Jesus Christ – a proclaimer of the good news. Paul refer to the recipients of his message as 'brothers' and 'sisters'; connoting members of the same family -the body of Christ. On this note, Romans 12:1 opens up this strand of practical session of commitment and righteousness reproduced in the believer's life (Hughes, 1991: 211).

"I urge you" has been given several connotations; having to do with either meaning it to be an authoritative command or a personal plea. 'In view (διὰ) of God's mercies' is viewed as the explicit ground on which Paul speaks, rather than his apostolic authority (Newman and Nida, 1994: 132). Although the latter is reflective of several of Paul's writings, the fact that the statement here has great bearing on God rather than Paul personality cannot be discarded. Charles (1993) posits that 'God's mercies' is a summary of all that Paul has said about the justification, sanctification, and salvation of men. It is not attributed to human merit or efforts, but to God's mercy. Paul's appeal is based on the mercies of God; the platform on which him and his recipients have become member of the same family. With παρακαλω (which can be translated as 'beseech', 'instruct', 'appeal', 'beg' or even 'exhort'), Paul comes to the readers with a serious sense of urgency - something that should not be taken for granted or even with levity. Paul brings the whole discussion to bear as a motive for devotion to God.

The word 'present' (which also means offer) is a key term to the text. It is somewhat technical. It is also used by Paul in 6:13, 16, 19 – "And do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as at those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (6:13). Here, Paul posits that we should present their bodies to the right hands, to the person who is going to use it skillfully to accomplish His purposes. As used in the analyzed text, 'present' has an idea of giving something over to another – to relinquish one's grip on it. It also connotes that someone cannot give it and then later takes it back. This is an element of decisiveness, expected from every Christian. παραστησαι as a derivative of παριστάνω when used as a metaphor means to 'bring into one's fellowship or intimacy' (Strong, 1996: 3936). This perspective gives rich meaning to what Paul communicates here – coupled with the cardinality of the concept of 'living' echoed in the same verse. παραστησαι further sets the platform for the concept of 'sacrifice' Paul later introduced in the next part of the text. This same word is used in Luke 2:22 – where Jesus was presented to God in the temple by His parents. This gives great insight to the life of Jesus; His parents

were giving Him to God, with no thought of taking Him back (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1991: 273).

What should Christians present? It is the body; and as living sacrifice. Paul's language would have immediately reminded Paul's first readers of the common practice of offering up animals as burnt offering to God in act of worship (Day, 2005: 23). Ritual offerings were made in certain pagan religions, just as it's a central part of the Mosaic Law (Kraus, 1966: 34). Unlike pagans, Jewish religion demands animals to be used for sacrifice must be without blemish; until then, the sacrifice remains unacceptable. The disqualification will be done at first by the priest, due to external examination, and then it's up to God to finalize the internal acceptance. *σώματα* - the 'bodies' is most appropriate; meaning literal 'bodies' just as Paul mentioned. Paul's emphasis of *σώματα* unveils the importance of the body in itself (as an authentic part of the human nature) and how significant it is to use the body to glorify God. Contemporary Christians need to watch and guide against every iota of secularism and modernization that has crept into the Church. This emphasis has a great bearing on the way Christians use their bodies – what do they think with their reasoning faculty, what do they do with their hands, what do they watch with their eyes, what kind of gatherings do they attend, what kind of music do they listen to; and many more.

Paul is setting the line straight with the connotation that there is now a shift of ownership; the bodies are no longer owned by the people who actually possess them in the physical sense but owned by God. It is also plausible to say the body stands for the totality of a person, the total being with special emphasis on person's interaction with the world. The concept of sacrifice in the African context is with the emblem that it can never be taken back in whatever way or means. In fact, when a sacrifice is offered in African setting, the priest instructs the owner of the sacrifice not to look back. This indicates that the sacrificed object is now a sacred entity which should not be claimed again by the one who sacrifices it. Paul's explanation is explicitly distinct from the Africans because it does not involve animals or idols. Therefore, one could perceive Paul saying to the Church "present your bodies to God without the thought of taking it back again, not because of anything but because of His mercies and love.

The body is the instrument for sacrifice. The depiction here suggests that this is the only instrument of sacrifice human have – the only thing someone can give to God. 'Living sacrifice' is a contradiction in terms (because sacrifice should be dead in the actual sense), except in the spiritual realm. Thus, 'living' is a deliberate contrast with the Old Testament sacrifices in which the animals were killed in a one-time act. Paul is talking about a very alive

body. Christians are no longer oblige to offer animal sacrifices, instead offer themselves with all the vital energies in continuing day-after-day worship. This is suggestive of the fact that in view of God's mercies, Christians becomes dead to sin, though still living in this world. Aside from the fact that the bodies are 'living', they are also 'holy' and 'pleasing' to God. Holy in the sense that the bodies are set apart in consecration to God; pleasing in the sense that such a sacrifice is a delight to God's heart. This is more like the Old Testament sacrifices which provides aroma pleasing to God (Gen 8:21; Lev 1:9, 13, 2:2). Also, Christ's sacrifice was likewise a fragrant offering (Eph 5:2), just as Christian's act of service to God. Public, cooperate worship is special and must not be neglected, but this is not the only part of the Christian life that maybe called worship. The true worship God desires is not a single act; it entails the whole of Christian life from day to day.

The features of 'holy' and 'pleasing to God' attached to living sacrifice heighten the extent of what Paul explains and this inherently sets up the platform on which the succeeding verse rests. The first verse talks about who a Christian should be; on the contrary, the second verse sheds more light by beginning with what he must not be. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world..." To 'conform' has the idea of pouring something into a mold. This line can be paraphrased 'do not take the shape of the world'. Do not allow the world to do the opposite of what God wants to do. An alternative to conforming to the world's patten is to 'be transformed' – a metamorphosis, complete makeover.

The 'world' in question refers to the age marked by satanic ethical and spiritual character. The world system Paul is talking about is in total opposition to God and His upright values. This relativistic and sin-justifying value system will continually exert pressure on Christians. Although *Συζηματιζεσθαι* and *μεταμορφουσθαι* is argued to be synonymous (Dunn, 2002: 709); meanwhile, significant readings of distinction in the two verbs are not plausible (Spence-Jones, 2004:343). This true contrast in this verse is not the two kinds of change (which *schema* and *morphe* provides), but the two totally different models according to which one may shape his life. The two competing models are; "the pattern of this world" and "the will of God". The instruction therein is that Christians should not shape their lives according to the anti-Christian cultures of this world (Sproul, 1988: 49).

Transformation is from within. To 'be transformed' is actually the passive form of a verb, whereas the word for 'renewing' is active. This is suggestive of the fact that God does the transformation, not man. However, the overhauling of man's thinking is what allows God to effect the transformation – "...continue to let yourselves be transformed." Unfortunately, many Christians are

conformed to this world; they do not sit and think through several opinions and make informed decisions (Sproul, 1988: 55). Instead, they act according to what the society and culture dictates. Since the Christian mind of undergoes constant renewal, it therefore cannot be neutral. The Christian life is characterized with a once and for all complete change of mind, contrary to what has been obtainable before Christ is accepted as lord and savior. This can also be viewed as a pointer to the salvific work of Christ – Christianity is not about a changed life, but an exchanged life. The mind is the seat of intellectual and moral judgment.

The word of God is the object for renewing the mind of Christians. Just like everyone else, Christians are confronted with a myriad of conflicting choices with regards to how to act and live. Thus, renewing of the mind is the renewing of the ability to think correctly, especially about spiritual and moral matters. The secular concept of meditation entails shoving the mind off anything and everything; this is incongruent with the biblical art of meditation. What God expects that the mind is constantly filled and saturated with His word. This act often aligns the Christian life with God. This is suggestive of the fact that a transformed and renewed life is absolutely controlled by the word of God.

The result of the transformed life is what leads to the last statement of Paul in verse 2; "...then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is his good, pleasing and perfect will." Test and approve can also be interpreted as 'discern'; this word easily captures what the two words connote. Also, some scholars argue that the will of the God is the purpose of the transformed life. Whether this statement expresses purpose or result, it simply reveals that transformation that renews the mind is a necessary yardstick for being able to discern God's will. In other words, unsaved person cannot trust his instinct. The term 'good' has been devalued by culture. The word good has been corrupted that unless something is fantastic, it is viewed as a piece of junk. You want to know how 'good' the will of God is?; it is as good as God is. The 'acceptability' is not only in prospect, but also in retrospect. Therefore, someone cannot add anything to the will of God and in any way improve it. God's will is totally, absolutely pleasing. His will is also perfect as Him; it matches His character and holiness. To know the will of God is to know what God wants or what He desires.

### Relevance of the Text

Just as Romans 12:1-2 is Paul's message to the Church in Rome; it is however explicitly relevant to the contemporary Church. Suffice to this; the Christian life begins with God. He is always ahead of man. He never asks man to do anything for Him; until man is fully aware

of what God has done for him. Many 'Christians' do not find it worthy to present themselves as living sacrifice because they have not come to the full-understanding of what God's mercies connote. They have not really grasp the gravity of what God has done for humanity through the person of Jesus Christ. Of a truth, a little child can recite John 3:16 – a very popular portion of the scripture. However, 'understanding' here doesn't have to do with recitation, but the careful alignment with what God has done as affirmed in the recited portion of the Scripture. Man's response to the saving grace through Jesus Christ is the true understanding emphasized here. God's love is so great and mighty (Kolawole, 2019a); this is what Paul captures with 'God's mercies'. Thus, the rationale behind everything Christians do and say must be God's mercies.

The act of 'presenting' one's self as a living sacrifice is man's responsibility. It is a decision to make. Just like the "non-conforming" act in verse 2, to present oneself is what a man must do by himself - for himself. This step is absolutely intentional – "present yourself", in other words, give yourself away! After giving one's self away, nothing is left to give again. By implication, this act totally discredits partial presentation – when Christians give themselves to God, they have nothing else left to give to any other thing. Therefore, a partial act of giving one's self away is as good as giving nothing at all. Unfortunately this is what many contemporary Christians do – "presenting some". The text does not read; "present your leg, head, hand, neck mind, head or even eyes; rather, the body." This is why Paul chooses the word 'body', so that the message here can be adequately captured to mean – 'the whole', or even 'without anything or any part left out'. Until this is done, Christians have not presented anything yet. In view of God's mercies, God is much interested in 'everything' about a everyone who has faith in Jesus, casting aside no detail of his life and destiny. Although the body was formerly men's, now it is God's.

The word living attached to sacrifice connote ones existence not only in this world (in general understanding), but everywhere a Christian finds him/herself; at work, market, school, government position, Church leadership and many more. Christians therefore remain God's ambassadors who are not in hold of their own lives but totally controlled by God. Among many contemporary Christians, pretence is the order of the day. Many portray themselves as angels in the Church but manifests as demons in several other places. Such Christians have failed - cannot be referred to as living sacrifice, because they are not being transformed. Also, many people think they can be transformed by themselves. Therefore, they exert their strengths and efforts in ensuring their transformation but all prone to no avail. Paul made it clear in his statement that

transformation is not man-made, but divine. It simply comes from inside-out. It is a fruit of man's act of presenting himself and renewing his mind: this is God's power, not man power.

The motive of the world is to mold God's children into its nature. This ravages the earth, including where Christians live, work and even study (Otunnaya and Kolawole, 2021: 200). However, the Christian life is an absolute relationship between God and man alone; it does not appreciate or accommodate interference with the world system at all. To be conformed to the world is to be enshrined in the forms and structures of the world. Sometimes, it could mean doing the popular thing. There is a conflict here; this is absolutely what sets up Paul's usage of "but" contrast; what is popular with men is not always popular with God. To be please to God is not always to be pleasing to men. This is what made Joseph said "How can I do this and sin against God"? Simply, God was Joseph's popularity. Christian's non-conformity must be selective; 'in view of God's mercies', this is because it is easy for contemporary Christians to trivialize the act of non-conforming and trivialize it to the length of simplistic externals as the Pharisee did. Ideologically, many Christians have dropped out of this world – they are non-conforming without transformation. Meanwhile, the theatre of God's redemption is this world. Christians should not flee this world ideologically, rather interface with it everywhere and every time should be platforms for transformation because God wants the world (people) to be redeemed, not escaped (Kolawole, 2020c). If Christians will be effective witnesses in this world, the study of the world must be done. More so, every Christians should have the passion and delight to please God. Often, the conflict is between what pleases and what pleases God. This is why Paul made God's enablement clear in the transformative process.

A clear picture of what the pattern of this age looks like is explicit in Kolawole's discussion on the concept of corruption in Nigeria context. A Christian in Nigeria can easily reckon with this though, it adequately relates to Nigerian Christians what the age of the Roman Church must have been like while Paul was writing to them. "In Nigerian education circles, bribes are demanded or used to influence examination results, exam malpractices, etc. Admission into Nigerian universities is no longer by the requirements, but by connection. Bribes are also demanded by hospital staffs in order to allow a patient see the doctor or receive prescribed medicine through illegal means or at the expense of other patients who arrived early. In Nigeria, the popularly-known government sector referred to as the boss of bribery is the armed forces, with peculiar emphasis on the police force. These government officials often stay by the road-side all in the name of performing their duties; but then, they take and receive

bribe instead. In fact, it has gotten to the brim that public transporters now have specific amount of bribe payment (N20.00 and N50.00) arranged in their vehicle for the bribers. Although, it is liable to increase in the course of negotiation; often depending on the terms of agreement between the bribed and the briber; this is no longer news in Nigeria! One of the trending group of this age are fraudsters; 'Yahoo Boys', who are also called 'G-Guys'. They are internet fraudsters, who exploit people through several dubious means" (Kolawole, 2020).

A man is a product of what he thinks. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The mind is the Central Processing Unit of the body. Therefore, the body is always after it, so as to lay hold of the entire body; to defile and to eventually make unworthy before God. Contemporary Christians must guide their mind so jealously with the advance porous activities that has ravage the entire world; ranging from music to the kind of movies or even novels one relates with. In fact, contemporary ministers and Church leaders needs to take cognizance of the devil's scheme in this regard (Thompson and Kolawole, 2020: 95). This plausibly accounts for why several 'Christian musicians' are not really who they profess to be. By the virtue of longevity, the devil has come to terms with the fact that transformed men are totally shield from his schemes; therefore, he tries everything within his reach to ensure that men are blindfolded and gradually swayed from the divine means of transformation.

Many Christians attend Church services and even several special Church programs, moving from one revival service to the other; from one prayer mountain to the other; yet, the devil's scheme is valid as long as those activities are just mere routine and do not have effect on their lives. In the contemporary time, the whole counsel of God is becoming scarce (Kolawole, 2019b: 37). Little significance is attributed to the word of God but much attention and time is accorded to all kinds of frivolous activities. It is disheartening the way ministers in the contemporary time have downplayed the importance of God's word; to the extent that they explained God's word as if Church members cannot grasp God's message personally until they come to them. This is just a strategy to maintain and retain Church membership and even guarantee their personal finances at the detriment of the divine growth and transformation of men.

Amidst all these, Paul provides contemporary Christians with thermometer with which words and acts measured – God's standard: it must be living, dedicated to the service of God and also pleasing to Him. Most contemporary Christians misconceive the 'will of God' as an obscure mystical reality and confusing. Most people spend much time in life trying to find what the will of God is, but they

have not presented themselves as living sacrifices. We are faced with choices and decisions on daily basis; in terms of career, marriage, choice of study, relationship, and institution of learning, among others. Paul's statement arrangement is significance here. He strongly posits that the will of God is to be discovered and done with such relish that it will be proved to be good, acceptable, and perfect. However, this does not suggest that the careless, casual, and uncommitted will somehow land on their feet and find out that they did God's will by accident. Rather he states that those who genuinely do what is required (present themselves) will definitely find in their own experience the reality of the sweet will of God.

### CONCLUSION

Paul's letter to the Church in Rome is of great significance. Also, its relevance to contemporary Christians cannot be discarded. Dedication and transformation should characterize the lives of all who have been justified by faith; those who claim to have come to believe in the lordship and the saving grace of God through the person of Jesus Christ. These are practical evidences that sanctification is occurring in the lives of Christians. The exposition of Christian truth requires a response in the enlightened heart and with this in mind, Paul asks his readers to do some realistic evaluation of their application of spiritual truth. In view of this, God is the sole purpose for Christian existence in this world whenever, wherever. Christians no longer live for themselves, rather they live for God, as 'Living Sacrifices'.

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