

“All In: Giving God Our Plans” | Romans 12:1-2
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(Discussion questions on page 7)

I wonder if you can remember the first time you rode a bike without training wheels. You wonder how in the world this thing can stay upright on just two wheels.

You learn quickly a few hard lessons: You cannot stay upright if you half-commit—you cannot half-balance, half pedal, half try. The only way to stay upright and go forward is if you fully commit—take a deep breath, lift both feet, and fully commit to the first few pedals. You simply have to go *all in* to ride a bike.

This lesson—that certain things only work when you go *all in*—keeps showing up in life. You will never experience the joy of learning until you go *all in* as a student. At work, it is the employee who is totally bought in who gets noticed. For a marriage to flourish, to work through difficulties, both spouses must be *all in*.

And this is true when it comes to **faith**.

If we want the peace of God, we must really trust in God.

If we want the Joy of the Lord, we must fully seek Him

And if we want the fruit of a Christian life, we must be *all in* in dedication to Christ.

Half-way, half-measures, half-hearted—no more works for riding a bike than life with God.

This is the single idea I want to explore with you over the next few weeks: ***What does it mean to go all in for God?*** How do we do it? Why should we do it? What holds us back?

The main verse that will set the tone for us is at the opening of Romans 12, where Paul calls Christians to go absolutely all in for God:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom 12:1)

A living sacrifice, a life laid on the altar for God, nothing held back. With the rest of our time, I want to do two things:

First, I want us to look carefully at Romans 12:1 to understand that this is in fact what Paul is asking of us—total devotion to God.

Second, I want to apply this. I want to ask with some specificity what it would look like to lay our lives on the altar for God—to go all in.

I. Romans 12:1 and Being a Living Sacrifice

There are two things to pay attention to in Romans 12:1 as it pertains to going all in. The first has to do with what *motivates* us to give everything to God.

Motivation

The motivation is there in the first few words, “Therefore, brothers, *by the mercies of God*.” This language comes before the call to be a sacrifice, and it sets up the motives.

“By the mercies of God” means “in view of, or because of, everything God has done for us.”

In Romans 1-11, Paul has been explaining God’s radical love and grace toward Christians: from creation to election to forgiveness to reconciliation to the giving of the Holy Spirit, to the promise of resurrection and eternal life, God has acted towards sinners with shocking love. Now in Romans 12-15, Paul sets forth how we should live in light of this.

The call to lay our lives on the altar, therefore, is not about earning God’s love—it’s a response to it.

My main chore in high school was cutting the grass. We had an 1.5 acres and the job required a sit-down mower, push mower, weed whacking and sometimes racking. And it all started with going to the musty shed outback—which smelled like wet grass clippings and gasoline; and where I always thought I’d get stung by a wasp—and dragging out the equipment I’d need for the next few hours. Needless to say, I only did it because I had to.

Later in life, the summer I turned thirty, my dad told me that shed was rotting, and he was tearing it down and rebuilding it—could I come home for a few days and help. I did. Together we rebuilt and repainted the shed. I have a picture of us my mom took, standing before the finished product.

Do you know how my heart felt, helping my dad with that shed, taking the mower in and out one last time? I had a sense of the deepest joy and gratitude, to serve him, to help him, to spend time with him. Why? Because as an older person, you recognize all the love and sacrifice your parents showered over you.

That’s the heart-posture of Romans 12. A son, or a daughter, filled with gratitude at the opportunity to honor their Heavenly Father for all He has done for them—joy-filled at the prospect of being close to him again.

Experience

A second thing to notice has to do with the *image* Paul uses, and what it might tell us about the *experience*—what it feels like—to go all.

The image is quite graphic: *our body as a living sacrifice*.

“Body” stands for the whole person here, the whole of life: our working, sleeping, spending, playing, relationships and dreaming. All of us.

This would have made quite an impression on any Jew or Greek of Paul’s day. They all frequented temples; they knew what an animal sounded like, smelled like, splayed on an altar.

Death: The image of sacrifice tells us something of the *experience* of going all in for God. On the one hand, it will feel at times like a death. To go all in for God is to deny ourselves and take up our cross. It is to put to death our fleshly and sinful passions. It is to say no to living according to this world.

Dedication: but death is not all. A sacrifice also carried the sense of *offering*, dedicating, something utterly to the Lord. Just as you might dedicate a room for family meals or a portion of income for a cause, a life as a sacrifice means we live dedicated to God's purposes.

So, Romans 12:1 tells us this: *in response to God's love, we are called to give our whole life to him, putting to death sinful desires, dedicating everything else to God's purposes and glory.*

This act of sacrifice can feel scary, risky. That's why it is important to know that we are making it to God—not to a bicycle, not to a career, but to the goodness, and power, and love of God.

That's the idea—God wants us to go all in for him. The danger, however, is leaving this too abstract. It always helps to get more specific. Like when someone says, "You should love your neighbors," it is more helpful for them to say, "why don't you invite one neighbor over for dinner this month." This is even more true with spiritual matters.

So today, and the next two weeks, we are going to apply Romans 12:1 to specific areas of our lives: our plans, possessions, and hearts. With the rest of our time today, we ask, what does it mean to present our plans to God as a living sacrifice?

II. Giving God Our Plans as a Living Sacrifice

Part of the makeup of a person's is his or her plans. Our plans are essentially how we are using our energy, organizing our efforts, to build towards something in our future. We aren't merely existing—we are planning and building. Our plans involve both what our hearts are after and how our minds are thinking.

You might say that in Romans 12:2, the next verse, Paul calls for a transformation of living according to my plans and the world's plans, toward living according to God's plans.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).

Be transformed, Paul says, so you can "discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." The will of God is both how God wants us to live morally and what he wants us to do practically.

So the first thing to notice about what it means to give our plans to God is that it *does not* first and foremost mean giving God whatever plan we've hatched and asking him to bless it. There is a time and place for that. but the first move is this: *we lay our plans on the altar, and ask him to help us see, understand, and submit to His Plan.*

And the Bible reveals to us that **God does have plans**. God made the universe and world for a purpose—His purpose. God made us for a purpose—His purpose. As God declares in Isaiah:

I am God, and there is none like me, ¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose (Isa 46:9-10).

With our lives and in our world, we are not the owner and architect; we are hands on the job site. The most important thing to grasp is what the chief architect is building.

A few summers ago, I started praying and wrestling with this question of God's plans as it pertains to our church. I asked myself, what would God want this church to look like in 2050. This led me to study the Scriptures with this question in mind: *what is God's plan for the future? And how does his plan for a local church fit into that.* And I realized in this process that what it means to turn your plans over to God, is really about turning your future over to God—it is saying, "Lord God, based on your plans and purposes, what do you want this church—or my life, or my family—to look like 1, 5, 25 years from now?

That time of seeking turned into a letter I have begun to myself, "TFCA @ 2050." It now consists of seven themes. These center around us being found faithful, mature, and fruitful in 2050—and having made an impact for the name of Christ. I wish I had time to share about them all.

But what I want to do instead, with the rest of our time, is to give us three diagnostic questions meant to flush out our own plans and compare them to God's. The questions have to do with (1) The Gold; (2) The Steeple; and (3) The Trusted Hand.

1) The Gold—What Are Your Plans Really After?

When you really probe your plans, you realize that involve a pot of gold. There is something about what you are building to in your future that is meant to deeply *satisfy you*—this is the gold at the end of the rainbow. We make plans to get what we deeply want. This is why in proverbs we often read that plans not only come out of the mind, but the heart:

The **heart** of man plans his ways (Prov 16:9).

I once heard an author and business consultant describe a technique he used with boards to see if they were on the same page. He would give each board member a piece of paper and ask them to draw a picture of what success was if their company achieved its plan and purposes. He said one person's drawing would be of several buildings—meaning the business was bigger—and another was of himself riding on yacht. The latter's drawing was the most revealing—that is what he was building toward, a luxurious and successful life. That was his pot of gold.

What is the pot of Gold at the end of your plans? That's a hard question to wrestle with.

In God's plans, the pot of Gold is this: *people glorifying and delighting in the greatest of His son.*

In the book of Revelation, Saint John sees a vision of heaven and of what is to come: There is "a throne in heaven, with one seated on the throne" (Rev 4:2). The throne is surrounded by "twenty-four elders wearing golden crowns" (4:4). And the twenty-four elders are falling down

before him who is seated on the throne and worshipping him and they cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor

and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (4:10-11).

If we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, we must lay our plans on his altar, and whatever pot of Gold they are building for. And we must say, “Lord God, unite my heart, and organize my life, around the plan to make me happiest when I am worshiping your son.”

(2) The Steeple—What’s at the Center of Your Plan?

Second, consider the steeple. The steeple represents the most important building in the city that is being built. In medieval towns in Europe cities were organized around a great Cathedral; so too, the early towns of New England were built around a town church. The point was that the rest of life was ordered by, and pointed to, the church.

We know from Scripture that the Church is at the very center of God’s eternal plan. As Paul says in Ephesians that God is at work in history so that

through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph 3:10-11).

Very practically, when we give our plans to God and reorder our lives around his, we must make the church central. Do you order your life around a local church? If we are organizing our lives in a way that minimizes, even neglects the church, then we are “being conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2).

The church should become the place where we make many life-long friends, where we pick up the rhythms of the Christian Calander, where our imaginations are shaped by regular worship in song and liturgy. If you want your life to be organized around God’s plans, then make his work in the local church central to your life.

(3) The Wise Worker—Are You Becoming the Person God Guides?

Finally, consider the wise worker—and by that, I mean the worker that God guides and uses as he accomplishes his plan.

Even once we’ve submitted to God’s larger plan, we are eager to know the specifics of his plans for us. We wonder how he guides us.

Sometimes God guides us very concretely in situations. But in this passage, the emphasis is not so much on *how* God guides us in the details of his plan for us, but on *whom* God guides—the type of person.

God wants to transform us into the type of people who are increasingly able to live with wisdom amid a crooked world, and follow his ways amid the complexities of life, as Romans 12:2 says:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12.2).

In teaching on how God guides us, Tim Keller once used a comparison between how one guides an infant verses a young adult. The infant cannot understand anything and needs to be carried. “But the way you guide a youth or adult is to speak to them so they understand and can make decisions without being led by the hand of every instance”¹

So a key question to consider when we turn our plans over to God, is whether or not we are becoming the type of people that he does guide. Are we developing the character and habits and lifestyle that more and more pick up on God’s lead—that hear and conduct our lives according to the cadence of heaven not earth. As the Proverb says:

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them (Prov 11:3)

Keller goes on:

The more we know God, ourselves, the human heart, the order of creation, the times and seasons, the more we will have the wisdom to make good decisions. Modern people want a technique for guidance, ‘five steps to good decisions.’ God offers wise character, hard won over a lifetime ²

So we have arrived at a first specific way to live out Romans 12:1—to present our lives as a living sacrifice to God, is to lay our plans on the altar. It is to consider our lives and ask what we are really after (the gold), what is at the center of the things (the steeple) and who we are becoming (the wise worker). It is to ask God to more and more make our plans align with His.

Are you living all in for God? Or are you designing the plans for your life, and merely asking him to come and build your dream alongside you? Are you ordering your future dreams around God’s future plans—with the church, His son’s glory, and your character as central?

Here Paul one last time:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [—your future, your dreams, your plans—] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom 12:1)

¹ Tim Keller, *God’s Wisdom for Navigating Life*, 225.

² Ibid

Small Group Questions

1. The sermon opens with the image of learning to ride a bike—you cannot stay upright unless you fully commit to pedaling. Are there areas of your life with God where you feel you are “half-pedaling?” What might it look like to go *all in* for God in these areas? What holds you back?
2. Romans 12:1 says that “by the mercies of God” we present our lives to him. What are some things God has done for you—for the Christian? How does remembering His mercy and love change your motivation for surrendering all your life to him? Perhaps a few people in your small group can share examples of when gratitude toward God moved them to deeper obedience?
3. The sermon applies Romans 12:1 to our plans—how we are organizing and arranging our lives in order to build or achieve something in the future. Have there been times in your life when you learned that God has different plans for you than your own?
4. The sermon asks some diagnostic questions to probe our own plans, take some time to consider each:
 - a. **The Gold**—What Are Your Plans Really After? What are you really working toward in life? If your plans work out and dreams come true, what is the “pot of gold” you’re hoping for? How does this align with God’s plans for the world and for you?
 - b. **The Steeple**—What’s at the Center of Your Plan? How central is the local church in your plans? How much is God’s work through the church—the shaping of your imagination, the gift of Christian friends, the regularity of the Word—impacting how you organize and plan your week, months, year?
 - c. **The Wise Worker**—Are You Becoming the Person God Guides? Romans 12:2 talks about being transformed by the renewing of your mind so you can discern God’s will. What habits or rhythms are helping—or hindering—your mind’s renewal right now? How can your group encourage one another to become people God guides?