“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies to him as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”

We have studied the book of Romans through chapter 11. In these chapters, Paul explained the world salvation plan of God that is made possible through the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In particular, chapters 9-11 convinced us that God's will for world salvation is being worked out in history through the remnant of faithful people. The remnant are those who know God personally, and who love God more than themselves. The remnant are those who live by faith from first to last. The remnant are the first fruits, which, when offered to God, are the hope of God for the whole world to be saved. We are the remnant of God in this generation. This is not a matter of pride, but a matter of God's grace. God chose us and called us that we might be rooted in Christ Jesus, and, nourished by his life and Spirit, take up our holy mission to proclaim to the whole world repentance and life in him. We are a remnant for the sake of others. We have been shown God's mercy, so that God's mercy might extend to the ends of the earth. To live as a Christian and remain in God's mercy, therefore, means to live as a remnant in this generation. In today's passage, Paul gives clear and practical direction for us that we might not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but live as God's holy remnant. Paul calls this becoming “living sacrifices.” May God bless us through this message to know God's perfect will for our lives.

First, Living sacrifices (1). Look at verse 1. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies to him as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” Paul is speaking to God's people as his dear brothers. In history, there has been no man equal to Paul in scholarship, spirit and faith. Paul's theology, developed in the book of Romans, became the
spiritual nuclear weapon which enabled weak and fearful Christians to overcome the world without once raising a physical weapon against their foes. As a young Pharisee, Paul had no hesitation in using his considerable authority to command others to submit to his will, or crush them when they opposed him. As commander-in-chief of Jesus’ spiritual army, Paul had to whip his troops into shape and send them into the battle. But as a man in Christ, St. Paul had been changed into a man of God’s grace. He came to know that God is the God of patience and love. God never panics or loses hope, but waits for his people to understand his heart. Therefore, after Paul had patiently explained the whole world salvation purpose of God, he presents his call to action as an appeal to his equals, the precious remnant of God’s flock. This is the secret of God’s hope in the remnant. The remnant of God are those willing to obey. To God, an army of 300 willing servants is more powerful and effective than 10,000 troops and cavalry. The willing are those who cannot forget God’s mercy to them and to the world.

Look again at verse 1. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies to him as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your act of spiritual worship.” Typically, in a call to action, the commanding officer would give a specific mission or task for his troops to carry out. For example, he might identify a certain hill or strategic position that needed to be taken. When the soldiers have a specific objective in mind, they are more likely able to focus their efforts and accomplish the task, or give their lives trying. Many Christians similarly would like to know what is the specific objective or task of their Christian lives, before entering into the fray. They calculate what they can or cannot give to God, and expect that God would work within the limits of what they feel ready to do. In this sense, they are like Philip, who calculated that eight month’s wages would not buy enough bread for the crowd of people to eat a bite, and therefore gave up in his mission to feed the crowd even before trying. But Paul in his call to mission does not lay out a specific task or goal for God’s people in the carrying out of God’s world salvation plan. Instead, Paul calls on us to make an unconditional commitment to God with our lives, to be used by God in any way that he sees fit. This is a living sacrifice.
Peter was Jesus’ top disciple. He had already sacrificed his fishing career and a home sweet home in order to follow Jesus and learn from him. Peter followed Jesus with a human dream to become a great man, perhaps as the prime minister in Jesus’ messianic kingdom. Opposition to Jesus’ ministry among the Jews became stronger, and some of the disciples became shaky in their faith. Judas was prompted by the devil to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver in order to save his own skin. But Peter held on to his dream, in spite of Jesus’ clear teaching concerning his suffering, death and resurrection. Finally, the night came. Judas led the detachment of soldiers to where Jesus and his disciples were staying. Peter drew his sword to defend his master, and swung wildly, cutting off a man’s ear! But Jesus rebuked Peter and commanded him to put his sword away. Peter was still determined to faithfully stay by Jesus’ side to the end. He followed Jesus at a distance. But when he entered the high priest’s courtyard, he was challenged by a little girl who identified him as one of Jesus’ disciples. Perhaps Peter wasn’t expecting to be challenged by such a person. Whatever the reason, Peter betrayed Jesus, denying three times that he even knew him. Peter had tried his best to follow Jesus according to his own dream and his abilities. He failed miserably. Then Jesus looked at Peter to remind him of Jesus’ promise, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” Peter cried bitterly. On the night that he had to give his life to protect Jesus, Jesus gave his life on the cross to save Peter and all mankind from their sin and shame.

It was perhaps a week or two later. Peter and the other disciples were in Galilee. The Risen Jesus had already appeared to them, and commissioned them to go into the world as his witnesses. But Peter was fatalistic. How could he lead the work of world salvation when he couldn’t even confess Jesus to a little girl? He went fishing, but couldn’t catch a thing. Then he and the other disciples saw a stranger, who told them to throw their net one more time into the water. They did so, and caught 153 large fish. It was the Risen Jesus, who had come to meet them as he had promised on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He cooked them a lovely breakfast of bread and fish, serving them again and again until their stomachs spilled out over their belts.
Then the Risen Jesus looked at Simon Peter. Maybe Peter remembered his shame at having betrayed Jesus. Jesus asked him: Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Simon had done his best to love Jesus and to serve him according to his desire and strength. He had failed. Now, Jesus was offering him the chance to renew his love relationship. But he could not do so if he held on to his human dream, or trusted in his own will and ambition more than in Jesus’ will for him. He had to decide to just love Jesus, more than anything else in the world. Peter understood what he had to do. He told Jesus, “Lord, you know that I love you.” It meant, “I love you. I just don’t know how. You know. Please show me how to love you.” Then Jesus told him, “Feed my lambs. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. Follow me.” (Jn 21:15-19).

Peter was a little nervous to hear these words. But he did not hesitate to follow Jesus. Perhaps he thought he would die too soon, leaving his wife as a widow. But Peter grew as a good shepherd and leader for the early Christian church. He endured floggings, imprisonment and finally being crucified upside down after going to Rome. But he told the flock of God under his care, “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Pe 4:13). And he urged those who had experienced God’s grace in their own lives in 1 Pe 5:2-4, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” In this way, Peter set the example for the flock of God in how to love and worship God through a life of shepherding his flock. In spite of his own failings, he had become a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Like Peter, we cannot set the conditions for our service and love for God. We can only offer ourselves to him, in view of his mercy and grace, and trust that this one act of worship will be pleasing and acceptable to God. God’s promise to us is that it is more than enough. “Seek first his kingdom
and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33).

Second, we should not conform to the pattern of this world. (2) Look at verse 2. "Do not conform any longer 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." In this verse Paul urges us not to conform to the pattern of the world. Sometimes, it's confusing to know why we should not conform to the pattern of this world and why we have to live according to the teachings of the Bible only. It seems not too bad to live like others. When others wear mini-skirts it seems good for us to try mini-skirts. When others wear maxis it seems good for us to try maxis. When others intentionally rip their gym pants around the buttocks and make short pants with many ragged edges and wear them in order to show themselves off as free men, it seems good for us to do the same. However, one thing must be clear. Surely we must not imitate their inner persons. We must adopt Jesus' lifestyle living in this world.

These days most people live for their own future success and security, according to the pattern of this world. Because of the influence of pragmatism and the secular humanistic educational system, most young people come to the conclusion that the easy way to success and the easy way of life are rampant in the nation. They don't have a sense of history or a sense of honor. If only they achieve an easy way to success and live an easy life, that's all. However this easy-going mentality deprives many young Americans of their spiritual strength. Many Americans painfully acknowledge that this kind of worldly consensus is not good at all. Still, most people blindly follow the worldly consensus. These days the worldly consensus seems to be the easy-going mentality which is against God's truth. The easy-going mentality says, "Take it easy." The Bible says, "You must deny yourself and take up your cross." (Lk 9:23)

Third, we must be transformed. (2b) The middle part of verse 2 says, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." People can change their habits from time to time. But it is most difficult for people to change their attitudes or desires. Some people spend thousands of
dollars for a psychiatrist’s help, only to find out that they are just the same sinners they were before. People are most afraid to be changed. But without drastic change we cannot be called the children of God. So Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17:17, "Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth." When we are transformed in Jesus we can see and understand God's will for us.

How can we be changed? That is a good question. First and last of all, we must decide to live according to the teachings of the Bible. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." This verse seems to be contrary to the pattern of this world. We feel that we will lose too much if we live according to this teaching. That is not the case. When our American forefathers lived to seek first his kingdom and righteousness, God blessed this nation until she became the strongest nation. Most people are afraid to be changed, but still there are many people who want to be changed. But we have no power to change ourselves. When we accept the word of God with sincere hearts God can change us through the word of life. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."

Fourth, God’s perfect will for us (2b). A miracle happens when we are changed through offering ourselves as living sacrifices, and practicing obedience to the word of God. Look again at verse 2b. “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” The most tragic element of life for most people is not knowing why they exist, or what they have been put on this earth to do. In our pride, we try to bargain with God, promising obedience if he reveals to us first what his will for our lives is. But only those who submit to God’s sovereign will for their lives first, can know God's good, pleasing and perfect will for themselves. We can have peace that surpasses all understanding, and strength that overcomes the world. St. Paul was ready to give his life for the proclamation of the gospel message. Then God revealed to Paul his true mission of life. It says in Acts 9:15-16. “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before my people Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” When Paul
wondered how he could possibly bring the gospel into Rome, the heart of the Gentile world, God sent him there as a prisoner. While a prisoner, he taught the Bible to his prison guards. In a short time, Christians took over the Roman empire, and Christianity could spread throughout Europe over Roman roads.

When I accepted God’s calling for me to live as a professor shepherd for the sake of raising up America as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, God sent me and my family to WIU. I wondered how I could be a shepherd for my nation from this small town of Macomb. But in fact God is using our family and our house church to send out gospel workers throughout the US and even to support God’s work in Russia, Bolivia and Canada. It is a miracle. But it is the promise of God for everyone who offers themselves as a living sacrifice. Life is a mystery for everyone. But for those who give their bodies and their lives to God, there is peace and victory for eternity. May God bless you to know God’s pleasing and perfect will for your life, when you offer yourself as a living sacrifice, and no longer conform to the pattern of this world, but are transformed through a life of obedience to the word of God.