

Living Sacrifice, Total Gift

Romans 11:33–12:8 • August 23, 2026

Gospel: Matthew 16:13–20

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

THE ASSEMBLY THAT ALREADY KNOWS

In the autumn of 431 BC, the assembly of Athens gathered to bury her first war dead. Pericles rose to speak. He did not open with the fallen. He opened with what every citizen in that gathering already held to be true, the greatness of the city, her laws, her way of life, ground the whole assembly already shared before he asked anything of the living. Only after establishing what everyone already granted did he turn to what he actually wanted them to hear.

Paul does the same thing to us this morning. Before he asks anything of the church in Rome, he first reminds her of what she already confesses:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?

Romans 11:33–34

We say amen to that easily enough. Ask us on a Sunday whether God's judgments are unsearchable, and we will nod. We already know it. We have known it since catechism. It costs us nothing to agree with a doxology.

But an assembly that knows something and an assembly that lives it are not the same assembly. We walk out of this room still certain we could have run the world a little better than he has. We second-guess the diagnosis, the layoff, the empty chair at the table, as though we had been sitting on his council and were overruled at the vote. We say the judgments are unsearchable and then spend the week searching them anyway, turning them over like a puzzle we are sure has a solution if we would just think a little longer. The distance between the doxology we sing and the complaint we carry home is not small. It is the whole

distance between an assembly that has heard something and an assembly that has believed it.

THE DEBT WE TRY TO COLLECT

Paul does not stop at our second-guessing. He goes further, into a place we hide better:

Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?

Romans 11:35

That question is not really about the mind anymore. It is about the ledger we keep even inside our devotion. We do not only want to counsel God. We want to be his creditor.

We bring him an offering, and some part of us waits for the return. We keep the commandment, and some part of us expects the blessing owed. We forgive the debt, endure the hardship, show up for the ministry no one thanks us for, and underneath it, quietly, we file the receipt. We tell ourselves we have given something to God, and we wait, sometimes for years, to see what he will give back in kind.

Even Pericles' Athens knew this instinct. A city could honor her dead as creditors owed a debt the living were obligated to pay back in glory, in monuments, in memory. Gratitude that never stops calculating what is owed is not gratitude at all. It is bookkeeping wearing gratitude's clothes. We do the same with God. We turn the gift into a bill and hand it back to him, certain he will settle it on our terms, in our timing, according to what we have decided we are due.

A GIFT NO CITY EVER GAVE

Here is where the text turns, and here is where it must turn all the way to you.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11:36

Every citizen Pericles buried that day had given the city something real, but not something total. There was a limit to the gift, because there was a limit to the man. What Paul names here has no limit at all. From him. Through him. To him. There is no corner of your existence left over that could ever function as your contribution to God, no fragment you could hand back as though it originated with you. It was always his first, your breath, your years, your very capacity to offer anything at all.

And into that reality, with nothing owed him and nothing left for you to offer that was not already his, God gave you a gift anyway. Not a token. Not a gesture. His own Son, sent under the very judgment we deserved for trying to out-counsel him, for handing him our bills as though he were somehow in our debt. Christ was crucified for that arrogance, our arrogance, taking the accusation that belonged on us and answering it with his own body, in full, holding nothing back. He was raised on the third day so that the verdict against you could not stand. He ascended and reigns even now at the Father's right hand, ruling over every power that would tell you the debt is still open, and he is coming again to finish openly what he has already finished in secret for you on the cross.

No city could ever repay her dead. But you are not being asked to repay anyone. The debt language collapses here, because the Giver was never your creditor. He gave you the whole of your salvation, sealed in Christ crucified and risen, while you had nothing to put on the table but the very rebellion he was answering. That is not a transaction. It is a gift so total it ends the category of repayment for good, and leaves you standing, not as a debtor working off a balance, but as someone who has simply, freely, been given everything.

LIVING WORTHY OF THE GIFT

Pericles told the living Athenians that the only fitting response to a gift they could not repay was to live worthy of it. He did not mean only the soldiers. He was careful to say that the city was built as much by the citizen who tended his

own field faithfully and still kept watch over the common good, by the one who held some small office no historian would ever record, as by the one who died in the front rank. Different service, same city, none of it optional and none of it owed.

Paul says it better, because he says it to a body whose gift was never in doubt to begin with:

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.

Romans 12:1

We do not offer our bodies to catch up on what we owe. We offer them because there is nothing left to catch up on. The gifts named a few verses later, prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, mercy, are not installments on a debt, and they are not reserved for the ones whose names end up recorded. They are simply what a body does, in whatever office it happens to hold, once it has stopped keeping the ledger. The one who teaches a Sunday class, the one who quietly balances the books, the one who shows up at a hospital bed with nothing to say but presence, the one who gives without expecting the gift to be noticed, all of it is the same worship, offered by a people who already know they were given everything before they gave anything back.

That is the shape a living sacrifice takes. Not a citizen calculating what is owed, but a people so certain of the total gift already given in Christ that offering their bodies stops being sacrifice and starts being, simply, worship.

From him. Through him. To him. Amen.