

The Fight For Your Life

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Prepared from the spoken message and lightly edited for readability. Scripture quotations and spoken phrasing are preserved as delivered.

All right, well, good morning. Hey, if you've got a copy of God's Word, turn with me to Romans chapter 12. We'll be in verses 1 and 2 today.

If we haven't met before, my name is Emory Cothen. I serve with the adult team over at the Champions campus, and it is a joy to be with you guys this morning. I want to thank Pastor Steven for letting me be here. If y'all would, this week, just be praying for him and for Chelsea and the boys as they're on vacation, that they would get some rest and renewal and be filled up to run hard this summer. Shoot them a text and say, "We love you. We're praying for you."

Let's get into God's Word together this morning. Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2.

You know, every Sunday morning about this time, I get a notification on my phone. Actually, I got it during the first service. I think it was during the second song. Did you get the same notification that I got? Every week, I see it. I don't want to click it, and I definitely don't want to read the details on the notification.

It's my screen time report. Did you get the same one?

I find it a little bit ironic that it usually comes through while I'm in church. You know what I'm talking about? You're like, "Okay, let's learn to be more godly, read His Word, and sing His praises." And it's like, "You watched 28 hours of Netflix last week." It's a little bit convicting, right?

We can spend a lot of time on our phones. There are some stats on the screen. Maybe you've seen these before, maybe not. But did you know the average screen time for an adult in the United States is six and a half to seven hours a day? Including work-related screen time, the average is estimated closer to 10 to 12 hours a day. So if you were like, "Oh, it's because of work," it is not. It's 10 to 12 hours there.

Gen Z, we love you, but you spend nine hours a day, on average, on a screen, not work-related. Ninety-eight percent of two-year-olds view a screen every day.

Here's some proof for you. This is our little guy. I just think this picture is so funny. He looks like he just came home from a long day of work with his legs crossed, you know? He's working hard. He deserves some screen time.

Last, but certainly not least, Americans, on average, check their phones - like when you do that little nervous deal - 180 to 205 times a day. That's on average. So some of us are helping bring it up, and some are helping bring it down.

Sometimes you can begin to wonder why you don't feel like you're walking with the Lord. Maybe you've been around church for a long time, but you're wondering why you don't look more like Him, why you don't know Scripture more, why your life doesn't really reflect that you've been a Christian for a long time.

This is a huge part of the problem.

Every week, I feel like I've been having the same conversation over and over again with the men I'm meeting with in our church. It usually goes along these lines: "Hey, man, what's going on? What does life look like?"

They go, "Man, I know that I'm supposed to walk with the Lord. I know I'm supposed to be spending time in the Word, and I know I'm supposed to be leading my family to do the same thing. But, man, I'm struggling. I'm just not doing it."

I usually ask a couple of questions along the lines of, "Hey, man, what does a day look like for you? What does it look like from sunup to sundown, from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed?"

Usually, the response is, "Well, man, mornings just aren't for me."

You're like, "Okay, what does that mean?"

"I wake up when I hear the first kid screaming."

I'm like, "Already a rough start, you know?"

"Then I go from there, get the kids ready, and go to work. I get stressed at work, and then I come home and deal with the kids again, or deal with whatever it is that I have to deal with that's on my plate. By the time it's evening, man, I'm tired. I just want to lie down, turn the TV on, and not think."

This cycle continues day after week after month, sometimes after year, and they look up and the only time they've spent with Jesus, or even around Him, is for about 30 minutes on a Sunday morning. Then they wonder - we can wonder - why we aren't living our lives in the way God designed us to live.

The reality is that we have a problem. There is a fight for your life. In fact, that's the title of our sermon this morning: "The Fight for Your Life."

We're in this FIGHT series, and we've talked about different things that we have to fight for or fight against. But this morning is an opportunity for us to be a little bit more introspective and do some personal work on the fight for our lives. We're in it, and some of us might be numb to the fight we're in. We don't even realize it. I hope that by the time you leave this morning, not only do you realize it, but you're fighting this fight for your life the way God called you to.

But the problem is, if you're numb to the problem, if you're numb to the fight, you're going to lose. I'm not by any means advocating for you to get into a fight, but if you've been in one or if you've seen one, you know that you don't win a fight by being passive. Victory doesn't come from just sitting back and doing whatever is going on around you. It comes from taking action.

We know that if we drift with the world, the way it drifts is toward death. We want to live a life that leads to

eternal life - a life here that is full of joy, hope, and confidence even in the midst of difficulty - so that we can live the life God designed for us.

But how do we fight for our lives? What does it look like, practically, to fight for the life God's given us to live? Let's look at Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2, and then we'll break it down into some bite-sized application points.

Verse 1 says this:

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.

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.

— Romans 12:1-2

If we're going to win the fight for our lives this morning, we have to look to Scripture and its Author, who gives us the direction for how we should live and the power, through the Holy Spirit, to live it in the midst of a hopeless, sinful world.

From Romans 12:1-2 this morning, we're going to find three ways that will help us win the fight for our lives.

Experience the Mercies of God

Number one, if you're taking notes, write this down: We have to experience the mercies of God.

What do I mean by that? It's a small part of Romans 12:1 that, if you're reading quickly, you'll miss. But we can never look over the mercies of God, certainly in this passage, but in our lives as well.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

— Romans 12:1

How do we do what we're called to do - present our bodies as a living sacrifice? We do it by the mercies of God.

What are those? Well, if you notice, we're in Romans chapter 12. I would encourage you this week to start the process - I would be surprised if you could get through it in a good way - of reading Romans 1 through 11. Go through it slowly and write down notes, because Romans 1 through 11 are a list of all these mercies of God that He provides for our lives.

The book of Romans was written by Paul, and he mentions these mercies all through the chapters. In Romans chapter 5, he talks about how we are justified by Jesus' blood, we're reconciled by His death, and we're saved by His life. Romans chapter 6, verses 1 through 4, talks about how sin was put to death and we were given life.

These are mercies of God. If you've ever heard that word, "the gospel," the good news of Jesus, that's a mercy in our lives. Because of what God did, we can experience freedom from sin and death, and we can be given life that looks dramatically different from the world we live in. These are mercies that He gives us.

Paul talks about sin, salvation, and sovereignty, and now he starts to speak about service. Chapter 12 is where he shifts gears. He's talking about doctrine in chapters 1 through 11, and then he starts to talk about duty in chapter 12.

These mercies are like a foundation for everything else in our lives.

I don't know if you're like me, but the weekends are my time to shine as a not-very-good person who works around the house on home projects. That's my weekend job. I work Sunday through Thursday at the church, and then Friday and Saturday I get to do home projects.

What I've realized from being in an older home - which I never want to do again - is that if there's something wrong with the foundation, everything else is way more difficult. Does anybody else have the testimony that I have? Any small thing can become dramatically more difficult when the foundation isn't rock solid.

These mercies of God in chapters 1 through 11, which we just don't have time to go through comprehensively, are a foundation for our lives. If you're fighting for your life, you have to realize that it belongs to the Lord and that you can't win the fight apart from Jesus. All the things He's done for us are the foundation we stand on when we live a life of gratitude.

Some people in this room don't know the mercies of God, and you're spending your life trying to earn God's salvation, trying to earn right standing, trying to do enough good that you can feel like you are holy to God. Because you've missed the mercies of God and all He's done for you, you're spinning your wheels trying to earn it.

But there are other people in the room who know all the theology. Man, you know Romans 1 through 11. You probably have a tattoo of it, right? You're a theology person. But if that theology doesn't lead to practical life change, you've missed it.

The mercies of God have to be the foundation we live our lives on, and we can't win the fight for our lives without the foundation of His mercy.

There's a guy I read this week who said, "A proper response to the mercies of God is not to speculate upon the eternal decrees of God, or even one's own place in the scheme of salvation, but to be obedient" - to live a life of obedience.

I'm going to flash forward right now to what we're going to do at the end of our service. I'm going to give you an opportunity to respond in our invitation. If you've never experienced the mercies of God, if you don't personally know Jesus and have a relationship with Him, and you haven't accepted all He's done for your life and made Him the Savior of your life, I'm going to invite you. I'm telling you now. We'll have a team up here that wants nothing more than to meet with you and talk with you about what it looks like to know and experience the mercies of God.

God has given us these mercies first, and we need those to win the fight for our lives.

Give Every Part of Your Life to God

If we're going to win the fight, the second thing we need to be aware of is that every part of our lives must be given to God.

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

When it says to present your bodies, presenting is to place something at someone's disposal. That makes us all very nervous, right? Because we don't like to give someone else what belongs to us. We know what's best, right? We can do it on our own.

But presenting our bodies means giving everything to God at His disposal. The body isn't just your physical body, but everything in it: your body, your soul, your mind, your thoughts, and your desires.

A.W. Tozer said, "A vessel that has not been presented will not be filled. God cannot fill what He cannot have."

There was this thing going on in the culture at the time called Gnosticism. We don't have time to go through all that it was, but in a nutshell, it boiled down to this: They thought the body was inherently evil. It was like this prison cell you lived in, and nothing could be good about it. The mind was what was good. So protect your mind, enlighten your mind, and grow mentally and as a spiritual being. But whatever you do with your body is fine because it's just inherently flawed anyway. It's no big deal.

It led to this huge set of problems, even in the church, because people would do things with their bodies that weren't glorifying God because they thought they had surrendered their minds to Him.

When He calls us to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, it means every part of who you are.

Many of the people at that time were used to the sacrificial system. You would present a dead animal one time to atone for your sin. Then you would leave, and you'd have to do it again and again. But it was always a one-time thing with that one animal that was dead, and it was very transactional.

This is quite the opposite. A living sacrifice isn't one and done. It's a continual sacrifice of your life as a reflection of your gratitude for what Jesus did for you.

Think about it. If Jesus did what He said He did for you, if He loved you so much that He died a death that you and I deserved so that we could experience freedom and a walk with God that we couldn't experience on our own, what's the best way we can say thank you?

It's a life of worship. Everything about who we are is praise to Him.

I don't mean we're just sitting in here every hour of every week. I mean when you go to work, it's worship. When you're at home, it's worship. When you're in the car, it's worship. Every part of who you are is worship to Him.

William Barclay said, "Real worship is the offering of everyday life to God. Real worship is not something

which is transacted in a church. Real worship is something which sees the whole world as the temple of the living God and every common deed an act of worship."

Before we moved to Houston, my wife and I lived northeast of the greater Dallas area. I was working at a church as the student pastor, and our senior pastor, Dr. Segrist, just had this way of reading me.

Have you ever had anybody like that in your life? Maybe it's your spouse, maybe it's your boss - somebody who just knows when something's up. You think you have the best poker face ever, and they're like, "I see right through that."

He called me into his office one day, and I'm going, "Oh no."

He's like, "What's up?"

I'm like, "Everything's great."

He's like, "Yeah?"

I'm like, "Yeah. Life's good, wife's good, work's good."

He's like, "I feel like you're not telling me something."

I'm like, "Man, well, honestly, 98 percent of my life is great right now. My relationship with my wife is great, and we were about to have our first kid at the time. We were excited. We had good friends around us. Our church was doing great. It was just really, really good, except for one thing."

Behind the scenes, our bigger-picture family was going through a lot. It wasn't sin in my life or my wife's life that was going unconfessed. It was just tough with some family dynamics. Has anybody ever been in a situation like that?

I was like, "Man, but this 2 percent of my life that's not going great is tough."

He's like, "I know. You're wearing it."

I was like, "I really thought that I was smiling more than I am."

He said, "Emory, something that you need to know is that even if 98 percent of your life is going great, but there's 2 percent of it that isn't what it should be, that 2 percent will shade everything else."

As we are called to surrender our lives as a living sacrifice to Jesus because of what He's done for us, it's got to be 100 percent. But for so many of us, there's that 2 percent in our lives that isn't surrendered to God, and we're missing the point.

The point of being a living sacrifice to God isn't that we do more at church and give more while we have shady business practices over here behind the scenes. It isn't that I serve a couple more hours in the kids ministry because I'm not treating someone in my family the way I should, and I kind of want to earn my way out of it.

No, what it means is that all of you, all that you are, and all that you own - everything - is surrendered to Him

as a sacrifice.

I was reading in my time alone with the Lord yesterday morning. Talk about God putting a word in front of you. Psalm 90, verse 8, says:

*You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.*

— Psalm 90:8

We can do a great job of convincing everybody else around us that the 98 percent of our lives is actually 100 percent. What you see that looks good - that's the reality across the board. But our God knows all of us. If there's anything that isn't surrendered to Him as a sacrifice, He's calling us to let it go. He's calling us to give it to Him. He's calling us to live our lives the way He's called us to and to fight, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to live that life.

I've read this before. It's an old adage in the church: "He is Lord of all, or He's not Lord at all."

God has your Sunday morning. You're here. You're doing it. But does He have your Friday night? Does He have your Monday morning?

As we fight for our lives, we have to say, "God, I'm putting all of me at Your disposal. My life is no longer about myself, my desires, my agenda, or my wants. Every part of me is at Your disposal and surrendered to Your will."

To win the fight for your life, first, we have to experience the mercies of God. Second, we have to give every part of our lives to God.

Engage in the Fight for Your Mind

Thirdly, we're going to hang out here for a minute: Engage in the fight for your mind.

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.

— Romans 12:2

How do we carry out living as a sacrifice? I think about it in sports terminology. That's just how my brain is wired. In this passage, I see some defense and I see some offense.

The defense I see is the first thing mentioned: Do not be conformed to the world.

Now, that's not something we say conversationally. You didn't leave coffee with your best friend this week and say, "Hey, don't be conformed." That's just not how we talk, right?

So what does it mean? We kind of get the idea, but not being conformed to the world has a meaning, a context, and a visual that helped me put it into my mind. Not being conformed means not putting on the

appearances of the world, not putting on the fashions of the world.

What does that mean for our lives? If we're going to live the lives we're called to, if we're going to fight for our lives, the defense is not putting on the appearances of the world.

But so often, with the stats we just read, we put ourselves in a position to look just like the world. When we go to work, we hear everybody talking about this show. So we go home and say, "Man, I know I haven't spent time with the Lord today, but I'm going to look dumb if I don't know all four seasons and the quotes from this show."

You spend your life immersing it in the culture of the world, and you start to put on its appearances. Your language starts changing, and your thoughts start changing. You go, "Man, that's not that bad. I hear that all the time."

Why do you hear it all the time? Because you're putting on the appearances of the world.

Let's be honest. Who cares about a TV show if it makes you lose your soul? Who cares about knowing what everybody else is talking about and looking like everybody else if we miss Jesus in the process? Who cares about the money grab and the desperate attempts to get to the top of the ladder to prove something if we miss Jesus? Who cares about TikTok if we miss Jesus?

That's a little personal for me. Do with that what you want.

Stop putting yourself in a position to take on the appearances of the world. You're losing the fight for your life, and you're wondering why. This is why. Because the thing that says, "Do not," we do.

Don't be conformed to the ways of the world. That's the defense. But the offense is to be transformed by the renewal of your what? Your mind. Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

This word "transformed" is the same word used when Jesus was transfigured. When He's there spending time alone with God, with Moses and Elijah, He looks like He changes appearance, right? It's this revelation of who He really is, but it's a change in what they saw in the moment.

For us to be transformed means for every bit of us to be changed. It's a fundamental, foundational, life-altering change that we can't do on our own. Only God can transform us, but we have to give ourselves over to that change.

That's us engaging in the fight for our minds. We're no longer being passive, no longer drifting with the currents of the world that lead to death. Instead, we're saying, "Not only will I not be conformed by the ways of the world, but I will be transformed because I will immerse myself in the Word of God. I'm going to pour myself into God's Word, but more realistically, I'm going to pour God's Word into my life so that I will be filled with it and it will change who I am."

I'm going to spend my time in prayer, not just 15 seconds: "Thank You, Lord, for this day. Bless the food. Amen." But, "God, please. God, save that lost person I work with, and use me. God, bless this person who's struggling right now."

If you start thinking about it this way, you'll realize there's not enough time in the day to pray all the things you need to pray. We'll start truly loving Jesus in every moment of every day, like He was right there next to us, because that's the reality. He is.

There's this YouTube video that I almost want to recommend you watch, but I feel like that would be in bad taste today. I think it's called "If Your Phone Were a Bible." Have you seen this?

The whole idea is that if your life, which is so often dictated by this phone - everywhere you go, this is out, when you're driving, when you're doing things - were replaced by a Bible, and you spent that much time in it, what would happen?

I was watching it, and in the video this guy is reading his Bible like this while he's pouring his coffee. He just keeps pouring. I'm getting stressed out watching it because I'm like, "That cup isn't this big, okay?" Then he just keeps pouring, and it goes everywhere.

I'm like, "Dude, I have never been that distracted reading a book before. Who would do that?"

Then I realized I had Adam Pemberton, the student pastor here, and his wife over. We were hanging out, and I was like, "Guys, I'm going to make a pot of coffee."

I went over to do it, and I was on my phone. I made the pot of coffee, hit "go," came back, and put my phone down. About 10 minutes later, I was like, "Man, that coffee smells really strong."

Then I realized that because I was on my phone, I forgot to put the pot under the coffee maker.

If we spent as much time in our Bibles as we do on our phones, it would be a different world. The world around us would be different. Your life would be different. The fight for your life would look dramatically different because you wouldn't be coming in on Sunday mornings on your last leg, just praying that we give you enough to make it a couple more days.

You would come in here excited to gather with the saints and praise our God together. It would be a celebration, not a lifeline every week, because He is the One who transforms us, and we are there to get everything we can from Him all the time.

There's a pastor named Ben Stuart. Some of the Aggies in the room may know him from Breakaway at Texas A&M. It's this new, small ministry that's starting up there with about 10,000 people.

I was listening to Ben Stuart the other day, and he was speaking to a room of pastors. He said, "Guys, so often we can get up in the morning and spend time with the Lord. But is anybody like me? Sometimes it gets a little stagnant. Sometimes it gets a little repetitive. Sometimes we miss the point of spending actual time with the Lord because our hearts and our minds are everywhere but in the Word of God."

He gave three very practical things for the people in the room to do, and I think they'd be helpful because it's changed my life. He said it's as simple as your ABCs.

I said, "I can remember that."

The A is acknowledge my emotional state before I ever open the Word of God. My journaling lately has made me feel like a crazy person a little bit, because I'm realizing that when I wake up in the morning, I'm struggling with this, I'm angry about that, I'm overthinking this, and I'm worried about that deal over there.

I just put it on the page. I say, "God, this is where I am right now."

Acknowledge your emotional state.

B: Breathe.

It's something we don't do because we just go. We're here, we're scrolling from one thing to the next, and we're in a rush all the time. Just stop and breathe.

Then C: Consider the Word of God.

After you've acknowledged your emotional state, after you've taken a moment to simply breathe - to breathe in those mercies that are fresh and new each morning - consider the Word of God.

What would the fight for your life look like if we just did some of these simple things every day?

You know the truth here: The fight for our lives is a fight for our minds. To fight it the way God's called us to is good. It says that we can test it, that we'll see, if we live life the way God's called us to, that it's good.

Not "test it" as in, "Put the Lord your God to the test," but test it as in, "Try it out and see." Go take it for a spin and see if, after a week of living some of these things out, your life doesn't look different and the fight for your life isn't going better than it was when you walked in here this morning.

I guarantee, if you give it one week, when Pastor Steven comes back, he's going to be like, "What is going on?"

From now until Pastor Steven is back, fight being conformed to the world and fight to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Your life will look different.

Three Practical Applications

I want to give you three easy, quick applications for doing this. For seven days, try all three. If you don't like it, I won't be back next Sunday anyway. You're good, okay?

First, start the discipline that will become a delight.

What do I mean? Maybe buy one of these things right here. Some of you don't know what this is. This is an alarm clock with a cord that plugs into the wall and isn't hooked to the internet at all.

What you can do is going to be a discipline before it's a delight, okay? You plug this in on the other side of the house. Your wife or your spouse will probably not enjoy this part, but it'll help you grow in your walk with the Lord.

You plug it in, leave your phone somewhere else, and get up when this thing goes off. Once you're up, you're up, right? "I don't want to go to bed now. I had to walk halfway across the house."

Then, when you get angry about it, acknowledge your emotional state: "I'm angry that I had to wake up today."

Get an alarm clock. It's as practical as this. Start a discipline that will lead to delight. What would your life look like if, instead of saying, "Man, I just need to sleep in. I need the rest," you realized that you need the time with the Lord more?

Second, cut the main distraction.

What's the main distraction? Check that screen time report. You'll find it pretty quickly. I'm not talking about talking with your mom or talking with your kids. I'm talking about TikTok. I'm talking about Netflix. I'm talking about the thing that's making you miss the most important thing.

Cut it and see what your life looks like.

Lastly, simply memorize one verse.

There are a lot of verses in this. Pick one. I do this all the time. I can read a chapter, or two, or three, and go, "Man, that was really good." Then I leave my time with the Lord and go, "Man, I don't remember what I read at all."

What would our lives look like if, just once a week, we memorized one verse?

In the fight for our lives, if we do these things, it will make a difference. So this morning, this is the call: Get in the fight. Stay in the fight. I promise you, it's worth it.

Let's pray together.

With your heads bowed and your eyes closed, we're going to have a team up here. They can come right now - ministers and church members who want to speak with you.

If you zoned out when we talked about the mercies of God, pick back up right here, right now. This is the time we talked about. Maybe this morning you need to surrender your life as a sacrifice because of what Jesus did for you. You've been trying it your own way. You've been overlooking the mercies of God and never experiencing them.

Today's the day that you start with the foundation of knowing the God who loves you so much. Make Him the Lord of your life today.

Secondly, this is an invitation for the believers in the room. If you feel like you've been losing the fight for your life lately, if you feel like you've been looking way more like the world than you want to, or if you feel like you're struggling because you know you don't look like Jesus like you should, we are here for you.

We're not asking you to leave here and try to fake it for one more week. We want you to come and pray with somebody, cry with somebody, talk with somebody, or confess with somebody - whatever you need to do to get back into the fight God's called you to be in for your life.

I can assure you that it's worth it. It's not going to come without some pushback. Satan doesn't like that we're

talking about this. But I promise you, it's worth it for us to live the life God's called us to live and to fight for it each and every day.

Jesus, we love You. God, we thank You for this morning. God, I thank You for the men, the women, and the people who are in this room right now.

God, I pray that You would speak to us in ways we can understand and that we would respond accordingly. God, that we wouldn't leave here just to get to lunch, or to the next thing, or whatever it is, and miss responding to You and to Your Word.

God, I pray that You would give courage to those who need to respond. God, that they would walk an aisle, grab somebody by the hand, talk to them, and say, "I need Jesus." God, that they would say, "I'm not fighting the fight God's called me to be in."

God, would You see Your church sanctified? God, would You see Your church honor and glorify You?

God, be with us now. Be with us in this moment. God, be with us in our worship as we give You the honor that You're due.

It's in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.