

Pentecost 13 / August 27, 2023

Romans 12:1

“I urge you brothers by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.”

Living Sacrifices

Have you ever made a sacrifice? You realize the way we answer this question is vastly different from the way people would have answered during St. Paul's lifetime. For us a sacrifice is submitting ourselves to a minor inconvenience for the sake of someone else; going to the ballet with your wife, or going to a football game with your husband. In baseball a player makes a sacrifice by putting himself in a position where he may go out, so that a team mate can advance. He hits a sacrifice fly ball, which allows a teammate to score. The ancients would scratch their heads if they heard someone talk about sacrifice like that. 'He sacrificed the fly ball? What kind of knife did he use?' Sacrifice also carries a heroic aspect. We speak of soldiers, police officers and others who died in the line of duty as having made the 'ultimate sacrifice'. In our usage sacrifice, whether it is heroic or mundane, generally means to give something up for the sake of another person.

When St. Paul urged the Christians at Rome to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, the word sacrifice was understood as specifically referring to offerings devoted to a god. A sacrifice was something that was offered to a god, to pay a debt, to assuage the deity's anger, or simply to grease the god's palms, so the deity would be inclined to give you something. A sacrifice generally involved the ritual killing of an animal. Sheep were a favourite in the ancient world, especially among the Jewish people. They even had a special gate in Jerusalem to get them to the temple as quickly as possible. The Gentiles had a much longer menu of animals that could be offered as sacrifices. Sacrifice generally ended with the shedding of an animal's blood. In the ancient world sacrifice almost always referred to offering the life blood of an animal to a deity.

We don't sacrifice the way our ancestors did. They sacrificed goats. We sacrifice fly balls. Have you ever wondered why? One dark Friday on a hill outside of Jerusalem, Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross to make atonement for the sin of the world and through that sacrifice fully and finally appeased the anger of God at human sin. The curtain in the Jerusalem Temple that separated the priests from the presence of God, was torn in two, from top to bottom. The barrier of sin that separated people from God was removed by the blood Jesus' shed on the cross. It took some time, but eventually Jewish Christians realized that Jesus' sacrifice had fulfilled the temple sacrifices. They didn't need to sacrifice anymore. The sheep breathed a sigh of relief. Jesus' sacrifice of atonement is the heart of the gospel message, it is the reason we have forgiveness and reconciliation with God through faith in His Name. As the gospel spread and took hold among the nations, people stopped worshipping false gods and sacrifice in the sense of shedding blood to false deities, became a thing of the past. Jesus had sacrificed once and for all, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God.

We no longer need to bring anything to God to made atonement for our sins. We don't have to bring anything to God to motivate him to give us good things. Jesus brings us to God and he receives us as a loving Father, who already is motivated to give us good things. We don't sacrifice like they did in the old days. Nevertheless, something of the sacrificial spirit remains in the church. We offer God sacrifices of thanksgiving by offering ourselves in service to others. Paul writes, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." He lists but a few of the gifts that God gives us that can be returned to him as sacrifices of thanksgiving in service to others. He mentions serving, prophecy, teaching, exhortation, contributing financially, leading and the doing of acts of mercy. We worship God and give thanks for Jesus' sacrifice by offering ourselves as living sacrifices in service to others as members of the church, which is the body of Christ on earth.

Paul uses the analogy of bodily parts to express the variety of service in the church. He writes, "as in one body we have many members, and the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ." God has blessed each one of us and every believer with his Holy Spirit and with various gifts by which we all serve as the body of Christ on earth. Even as every part of our bodies serves a valuable purpose, so each one of us has purpose, meaning and value as members of the church of God in Christ Jesus. Think for a moment and consider how God has gifted you and what service you can offer as a sacrifice of thanksgiving as a member of the body of Christ.

Sometimes it's easier to think of what we can't do rather than what we can do. And sometimes we are grateful for what we can't do. I'm grateful that I don't have a knack for learning tribal languages and am therefore not a good candidate to do evangelism to primitive people. Because, that means I'm less likely to be eaten by cannibals.

Sometimes it's good not to be gifted in certain areas. Of course I'm joking, but it is true that some are better suited to certain areas of ministry than others. Nevertheless, we are all gifted to minister in some way as members of the body of Christ. We serve as members of the body of Christ by offering our bodies in moral obedience to the commands of God. Paul writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..." St. Peter wrote, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evil doers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God..." God calls and empowers all of us to live moral, honest, Christian lives... Living a Christian life is a service to others and a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God.

We can't all be leaders and not everyone is wealthy in dollars and cents—although we are all filled with the riches of God's grace in Christ Jesus—but we can all be kind. Of all the Christian virtues and gifts of the Holy Spirit, kindness—also known as mercy—is one of the most overlooked. An evangelist like Billy Graham will speak to thousands in a stadium and reach millions on television. We think what a great service to God and that we would never be able to do anything close to that. But everything an evangelist accomplishes preaching the message can be undone by the unkindness of others who bear the name of Christ. On the other hand, the best way the gospel message is reinforced is through the kindness of Christians, who extend Christ's love in acts of mercy on a daily basis in the most ordinary of ways. Remember Jesus said, "whosoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water...I say to you, he will not lose his reward." He didn't say that just to be kind. He said that because little kindnesses mean a lot and have a powerful effect in the sharing of the gospel. We who have received God's mercy in Christ Jesus can all be kind.

We offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices by discerning the will of God in our lives and discriminating against the ways of the world. We shouldn't discriminate against people on the basis of race, gender and other grounds. Writing to the Corinthians Paul says we shouldn't even disassociate ourselves from evil doers and those whom the world considers immoral, but we shouldn't do the things they do. We should disavow the devil and discriminate against all his works and ways. As believers we have been made new in our spirits in our relationship with God. We have also been transformed in our thinking that we may discern the will of God in our lives and distinguish between the ways of God and the way of the world. John wrote, "Do not love the world and the things of the world, if anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the pride of possessions is not from the Father..."

In Corinthians Paul speaks about the ability to discern spiritually between the things of God and the ways of the world. He says, "We have been given the mind of Christ." Having the mind of Christ doesn't mean that we know everything Christ knows, it means we have the ability to see through the eyes of Christ in extending mercy to others and the ability to discern between good and evil, the ways of the world and the way of God. This is what Paul is getting at in our text when he says, "I appeal to you brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...which is your spiritual worship." Spiritual worship can also be rendered "your reasonable worship." Reason is the part where we use our brains. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God."

We like to think we are free and unique individuals, but it is amazing how often we do the same thing as everyone else, without thinking. 'Just doing what everyone else is doing,' is the mantra of the world. How often have people done the most ridiculous things without thinking, just because everyone else was doing it? How often have people done the most reprehensible things 'just because everyone else was doing it' and later been ashamed of their actions. We live in a pro-choice society. Everyone is supposed to have the right to choose. The worst thing you can do is take away someone's right to choose. As Christians we like to think we can choose good over evil and God over the devil. But, before you can make a choice you have to be able to think. When we do something without thinking we have surrendered our choice. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." We develop our powers of spiritual discernment by studying the scriptures and discussing them with fellow Christians. We test the thoughts and opinions of the world against the scriptures in counsel with fellow believers. In all things we seek the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit. In these ways we learn to distinguish right from wrong, so we can choose good over evil. This too is our worship, the offering of ourselves to God in thanksgiving as living sacrifices.

In the Old Testament the Lord had to warn the children of Israel not offer their sick and dying animals as sacrifices. He knew that some people wouldn't want to sacrifice something healthy and valuable. A general principle of Old Testament sacrifice was, 'if it's already dead or dying, it's not a sacrifice.' We often think of sacrifice as a negative thing, doing something you don't really want to do, because you have to. As if the offering was more of a sacrifice the more begrudgingly it was given. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Most importantly, rather than something forced, a sacrifice acceptable to the Lord comes from a heart that responds with thankfulness to what God has first given.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice by offering himself on the cross in payment for the sin of the world. Jesus was the most perfect and precious sacrifice. He gave what he did not have to give, to pay a debt he did not owe. He sacrificed not because he had to, but because he wanted to. He wanted to sacrifice, because of his deep love for the Father, for us and for every human soul. He sacrificed as an expression of the kindness of God's love. St. Paul wrote, "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy...through Jesus Christ our Saviour." In response to God's sacrificial love freely given in Christ, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices; giving thanks to God by sharing his kindness with others, discerning his will and living lives that bring praise to his name. In Jesus' Name. Amen