

Romans : Living Sacrifices

Sunday 23rd August 2020

Readings: Psalm 124, Exodus 1:8-2:10, Matthew 16:13-20, Romans 12:1-8

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Sometimes sermons might seem like a lot of theoretical understanding, important but not always easy to apply or to appropriate to ourselves. In the last three weeks we have considered the apostle Paul's writings, in Romans 9-11, on the Jews and the Gentiles. For some there may not have seemed to be a lot of daily application. However, what Paul continues with from chapter 12 is very much the basis for practical application in the life of every Christian. Underlying his words is one of the same themes that underpins God's dealing with Jews and Gentiles: mercy and loving kindness. This are the unmerited outpouring of God's love on the unworthy, the undeserving, even us.

Paul begins chapter 12 with a classic Pauline *"therefore"* – always a sign he is saying something important. Here Paul is saying, in light of the mercy God has shown to Jew and Gentile alike, regardless of where you have come from, you too have received God's compassion – that's why you are here. Therefore, in light of this mercy, **"offer your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship"**. Let's unpack this a bit.

We are familiar with the phrase "to put your body on the line". It is something we expect from, say the All Blacks when they go out to play. When a player of international standing doesn't do this it's never forgotten, like the Wallaby David Campese stepping off the field, getting out of the way of a charging Inga Tuigamala. We expect our top sportsmen and women to give their very best, to go above and beyond, not just for themselves but for the pride of the country. This captures something of the essence of what Paul is saying but not all by any means.

In Greek thought the spirit/soul and body were considered separate entities. A dualistic understanding that has permeated Western society even up until today. In Greek thought the body was polluted, unclean and unable to ever fully obtain to deity. What is here on earth, in this thought, was a poor echo of the ideal that was the realm of the gods. The soul or spirit, by discipline and self-denial might, with extreme effort aspire to something close. In contrast Judaic thought, as we see in Paul's writings, understood the 'body' to be the totality of one's being with little subdivision of the physical and spiritual. If anything, as we see in 1 Corinthians 15:35ff, Paul explains to the wider audience that the body is perishable but it is raised imperishable. We are both physical and spiritual together. We saw something of this in Romans 6:4 when Paul, speaking of baptism observed: **"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."** We don't physically die when we are baptised ... at least that's not supposed to happen ... but rather a new spiritual life goes together with the physical life that we live going forward. Our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20). When Paul speaks of offering our "bodies" he is speaking of offering the totality of who we are to God, in everything we are and do.

This we are told is **"holy and pleasing to God"**. When we offer ourselves we present ourselves, our lives, as an offering to God, freely and willingly. If God wanted robots that did everything God wanted every time, perfectly, he would have created them. Instead God chose to create us, fleshy, living, complex, beings with the ability to choose. If you have a boy-friend or girl-friend, a partner, a spouse, you know the joy of mutually choosing – you chose each other for love, for shared hopes and dreams and shared experiences. At least in the West that's how it normally happens. There is a deep joy and happiness in that free-will exchange, that desire, that unity. God desires us to freely chose God as God has chosen us. This is pleasing to God. As we work at walking in that relationship, as we increasingly offer the practicality of our lives and work at aligning what we do, think and say with the will of God, God is pleased with us.

When we consider the Old Testament there are two parallels to note. Firstly, sacrifice was normally of dead things, be they harvested crops, birds or animals. Their life given as a sacrifice, their bodies complete as it were, given in response to the promise recompense for sin in the Messiah. Sacrifice was also of the best – the first crops, the best, pure animals and so on. Secondly, the Old Testament considers the work of the priests as “holy” and “set apart”. These were men of the tribe of Levi set apart by God to minister day and night in His presence. In continuity with this the New Testament consistently teaches that the Christian community is a holy people. The apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:9) states, **“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”**. Some of you will be aware of the term the *“priesthood of all believers”*. Because Jesus, God Incarnate, is our Great High Priest, (Heb. 7:23–28; 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6), we do not need any person to be an intermediary between ourselves and God. The priest was that historically but is no longer required, we can talk with God ourselves. In this sense each of us are priests and we present the sacrifice of our lives and bring God joy in doing so. This is indeed true worship – living for God in all that we do.

What does this mean to our lives? Let begin by looking at it through the lens of our reading from Exodus. The narrative takes us to the people of God in Egypt. Now some fifteen to eighteen years in the land the people have become so numerous they are a threat to the Egyptian leadership. Pharaoh decides to do away with them, starting by killing their new-born babies. Lucifer’s plan through history to destroy God’s people has another chapter here. Pharaoh instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill male babies. But the women have another plan, they will effectively ignore Pharaoh’s instruction. They will do what is right, even if it means they will suffer for it. Not only did the Hebrew people continue to grow but God blessed the midwives for their faithfulness.

Let’s think about this in our current context. The state, whether through government decision of populist movement is making numerous fundamental changes to our society. This has happened over the last two decades in particular with deliberate social engineering. This election we have critical decisions to make over drug reforms and end of life choices as well as the government. In all such decisions it is well recognised that the vast majority vote either the way they and likely their family always have or by what will give them the most in the back pocket. But how are such actions God honouring? They’re not. We have, each one of us, as Christians, to consider the issues and vote according to what we believe is the most God-honouring position and what is most in line with His will. Now I’m not so foolish as to tell you what I think that is. Each of us has to make those decisions in the integrity of our faith and understanding before God. Now here is the real challenge. Different Christians will come to different conclusions on all or part of these issues. Is that a problem? Does that say there is something wrong with a person’s faith or integrity? No, it doesn’t. Each one of us is at a different place in their walk. Different knowledge. Different experience. Different mistakes, Difference successes. What is critical however is the integrity by which we make decisions and our heart to keep the Lord at the forefront of our decision making. As the disciples recognised who Jesus was differently when asked, because they were all at different stages in their walk, so too we have to act with integrity at the place we are at. This is how we become holy and pleasing to God in our time.

Sometimes our decisions will take us into conflict with society or our friends, swimming against the tide as it were, at others the trend will be with us. Neither situation is important against the value of your integrity. In this there is also potential cost. Like the midwives of Exodus there may be very real consequences for the decisions, the actions, the inactions we make. Like the midwives we do not know the consequences when we make decisions, we can only imagine. Hopefully, like the midwives, we will see God’s blessing on our faithful in our lives, but it may not be so, our treasure may be in heaven and a later reward.

I'd also like to venture a comment on the COVID situation as a current example as there are some crazy things happening and being said in the world. God expects us to use our brains and all of the resources He has provided us with to make good decisions and act on them. We need to prayerfully and reflectively consider who and what to listen to. People's lives may literally depend on it. It saddens me deeply when I see the irresponsible actions of some church leaders who choose to ignore the advice of medical experts and fellow believers and foolishly expect God to save and protect them as they meet together. They literally kill themselves and their parishioners. Is this God honouring or worthy worship? They are not using all of what God has given, their bodies, their brains, their resources to make good decisions. And it is not a good witness for God or the Kingdom. Our true and proper worship is to utilise what God has given us, to stay in tune with His Spirit and to act appropriately with love, compassion and mercy as God has done.

Romans teaches us that, like Jesus, in order to worship with our lives, we need to be humble. We should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of us. To provide living worship of God requires us to take time to be reflective. In our quiet times, our prayer times, ask God to reveal to you how you can better serve Him. Think about what you have done well, what you could do and how you bless God and others. From this should come, not only things to repent of, but natural action plans of what we want to do to serve the Lord more faithfully.

Paul also reminds us that we are not all the same. He got that right! Each of us, he says, like the members of a body, have differing functions. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. In Christ, each of us belongs to the other and we are one body together. Using the examples of prophesy, service, teaching, encouraging, generously, leading and showing mercy, Paul exhorts us to use our gifts to God's glory and to do it cheerfully. Of course, there are many other gifts and combination of gifts that God gives to each one of us. As we determine our gifts and talents that God gives, Paul was never going to list them all, we are exhorted to use them for God's glory. As we do so we worship with our lives.

We can't end without mentioning the obvious: Jesus is the perfect example of sacrificial living – not just in His death but in His life. Jesus chose to give up many things most would take for granted: the possibility of marriage, of a family, of a career, of a normal peaceful life to serve us and through us His Father. His lifestyle and attitudes model our goal and we will talk more about this next week in considering Christian Living.

For now we recognise that each of us are worshippers in the whole of our lives and the quality of our worship is known only to each of us and the Lord. So, a final thought ... What is it that we do when we come together for worship? We do what the Lord has asked of us ... to come together to sing praise and worship together in His presence, to hear His Word and to learn, together as community. This too is a vital part of our worship, but only a part, even if important. Your worship, your greatest worship, is the fullness of your life, given freely in love to God. Our greatest privilege: to walk in Jesus' shoes and be a Living Sacrifice like Him.

Amen.