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Sermon Brief
Text: Rom. 12:1-2
Title: Sacrificial Living
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

“Sacrificial Living” -- this is the title of the sermon today, as well as the theme of our worship service. Most people know a little about making sacrifices. If you have children, you parents know what I’m talking about. You make sacrifices repeatedly in your daily schedule, in your finances, in your priorities etc. for the sake of your kids. One of the dictionary definitions of ‘sacrifice’ is

3 a : destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else b : something given up or lost <the sacrifices made by parents>¹

At the heart of the idea is giving up our own desires in order to help or assist another person.

In the religious world of ancient times worshippers of deities customarily made sacrifices to their gods as the center piece of worship. Sometimes these sacrifices were taken from grains such as wheat and barley, but mostly they were animal sacrifices. The animal would be killed and cut up according to strict guidelines. Usually its blood was captured in some kind of container. Depending upon the guidelines of different religions, this would be done possibly by the worshipper at home before coming to the temple of the deity. But most of the time the worshipper carried the live animal with him to the worship center and presented it to a priest who then ritually slaughtered the animal so it could be offered as a sacrifice. Typically only a portion of the animal -- often its blood and some of the meat -- would be placed on the altar of sacrifice to be burned as an offering to deity. The remainder would be either kept by the priest for the support of the temple, and a smaller segment would be returned to the worshipper to be cooked and eaten as a part of the worship celebration at home.

Fundamental to the idea of religious sacrifice is the necessity of death. The sacrifice must die and its remains then be presented to the deity as an offering. For the worshipper making the sacrifice, there would be personal financial cost. The sheep or bull would have either come from his flock or herd. Or, else it would have been purchased at the temple by the worshipper from the supply of sacrificial animals made available by the temple priests.

In the sacrificial system of the Jewish temple as taught by the Law of Moses in the Old Testament, the shedding of the blood of the sacrificial animal was critical, for the blood symbolized life. Willingness to give up life and to present it to God was a central part of the Jewish temple theology and liturgy in Jerusalem.

When the apostle Paul made his appeal to the Christian communities in Rome in Rom. 12:1-2 he played off this ancient practice, both generally and specifically in the Jewish tradition, in order to make his fundamental point about the nature of Christian commitment to God. Hear his words to the Romans and ultimately to us today:

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.²

Romans was written by Paul from Corinth during the third missionary journey in the mid 50s of the first Christian century (cf. Acts 18:23-21:16). It was the apostle’s plan to return to Jerusalem to deliver the massive relief offering to the suffering Jewish believers in Christ in Palestine. This offering had been collected from the dominantly Gentiles churches in the northwestern Mediterranean region during the third journey. Once this task was completed Paul anticipated coming to Rome in the hopes of using the imperial city as a base of

¹Merriam-Webster Online dictionary, “sacrifice.”

1 : an act of offering to a deity something precious; especially : the killing of a victim on an altar

2 : something offered in sacrifice

3 a : destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else b : something given up or lost <the sacrifices made by parents>

4 : loss <goods sold at a sacrifice>

5 : sacrifice hit

²GNT: 12:1 Παρακαλώ οὖν ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ παραστήσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσι-
αν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ, τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν· 12:2 καὶ μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ,
ἀλλὰ μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ
εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον.

operations for evangelizing the western Mediterranean Sea region. God would have other plans, but at the time of the writing of Romans this was Paul's thinking (cf. 15:22-33). Having never been to the church previously, this letter became a more formal introduction of himself and his ministry to the church in Rome in order to lay a foundation of support in the church for that anticipated ministry.

These verses, 12:1-2, play a critical role in the thought expression of Paul in this letter.³ The first eleven chapters have largely centered on God's making His righteousness available to sinful humanity through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus on the cross. Now in chapters 12-16 the apostle will spell out in considerable detail how people making a faith commitment to Christ are to live out their life in devotion to Christ as their Savior. The first two verses, 12:1-2, express the foundational principle for these ethical and spiritual guidelines of Christian living. That is, the exhortations to Christian living in 12:3-15:33 are based on the nature of Christian experience defined in 12:1-2. Consequently, these verses stand as crucially important to understanding how to live the Christian life.

Summed up in its core essence the text defines the Christian life as "Sacrificial Living." What is that? And how do we do it?

BODY

I. Living sacrificially: how it begins, v. 1

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

12:1 Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ παραστήσαι τὰ σώματα ὑμῶν θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ, τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν.

In this classic scripture passage on Christian living Paul underscores the nature of one's faith commitment to Christ from the outset of faith. It is a surrender of one's life to God unconditionally. To be certain, subsequent affirmations of this commitment will be made over a life time of Christian service. But it is to begin in this manner.

Paul's appeal to the Roman Christians -- an urgent one that was ongoing -- was that they present themselves as a 'living sacrifice' to God. This image does not come out of the modern idea of making occasional sacrifices for the sake of your children etc. Rather, it is much deeper and more profound than that. The language of Paul clearly goes back to the idea of religious sacrifice common in his world, and especially to how this concept was understood out of his Jewish heritage of animal sacrifice in the Jewish temple at Jerusalem.

Why is this important to identify? If our thinking about 'sacrifice' comes out of our modern world, then religious sacrifice can easily mean 'giving up smoking for the forty days of Lent', or something similar. Before and after these forty days we're completely free to practice this habit. Modern ideas of sacrifice mean temporary giving up of things considered important. Modern sacrifice has no background understanding of human sinfulness and what is required to come into the presence of a holy God. Certainly, modern sacrifice has not implication of dying and death as an integral aspect of the sacrificial action. Only in the most extreme of cases would one sacrifice his life for another person.

But in Paul's image the theology of Jewish religious animal sacrifice is critical. It provides the details of the image that Paul is presenting in our text. Human sinfulness as the barrier to coming before a holy God is critical. He has spent the first eleven chapters of this letter addressing this very issue. The sacrificial giving of the life of His Son Jesus on the cross is the supreme act of God in enabling us as sinners to come before the God of ultimate holiness and righteousness. Death is essential to sacrifice, not the rare extreme. The sacrifice has to meet strict standards of purity in order to qualify as a potential sacrifice. The worshipper was forbidden to select the sick and the worthless animals to offer as sacrifice. Only the very best of the flock qualified. God demands the very best, and will not accept less. The worshipper had to follow the divinely given procedure for making the sacrifice. He couldn't decide to do it his way; it could only be offered up God's way. All these details laid out in the Old Testament codes and more stand in the background of Paul's use of the image of sacrifice here in verse one.

Against this Jewish background of animal sacrifice Paul places the image on the table with a distinctive Christian twist; we are to make a 'living sacrifice.' But this cannot be something we own, like a sheep or a bull. Instead, what we are to offer up to God is nothing less than ourselves. Paul expresses it as giving up our bodies to God as an offering. How strange! What does he mean by this?

Our physical body is the foundation of our existence, it is our life. Without it we die and cease to exist as

³“There is a consensus among current exegetes that these two verses provide the main theme,¹ the introduction,² summary,³ or a kind of title paragraph⁴ for the subsequent chapters of moral exhortation that I am calling the fourth proof of the letter.” [Robert Jewett, Roy David Kotansky and Eldon Jay Epp, *Romans : A Commentary*, Hermeneia—a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 725]

a human being.⁴ But death is essential to sacrifice. How does one die and continue to live? The example of the cross is central. Jesus died physically on the cross. But critical to that was the surrender of His will to that of the Heavenly Father. “Not my will be done,” was Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemanaee before his arrest. Paul put it this way to the Galatian believers (Gal. 2:19-20, NRSV):

19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ;
20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Christian conversion is a death to self, first and foremost. In faith commitment we surrender the control of our life to God. We cease running our own show; from conversion on God runs the show. We become His servants and His children. In this marvelous religious transaction, God changes us, cleanses us, qualifies us to come into His presence, makes us His children, sends His Spirit into our lives to guide us through life. On and on we could go about the details of what happens at the moment of conversion.

In our text Paul qualifies this offering up of ourselves as a living sacrifice four ways.

1) **We can make this sacrifice ‘by the mercies of God’** (διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ). Although this phrase can be understood to qualify the verb “I appeal” (Παρακαλῶ) it is better understood to qualify “to present” (παραστήσαι). The point is that within our own strength and ability we cannot completely relinquish control of our life over to God. Only through the dynamic and enabling power of God entering our life through His merciful actions will be able to make such a surrender.

2) **We offer up a holy sacrifice to God** (θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν). Ancient Israelite sacrificial animals had to be spotless and without blemish. But we are sinful and corrupt. The core idea of holy is to be set apart to God. We are to offer ourselves completely to God. In that we dedicate ourselves wholly to Him and to His use of our life. He cleanses us from our sins, and makes us a fit vessel for His presence and for His use. From conversion on our life is dedicated completely to God.

3) **We offer up a sacrifice well pleasing to God** (θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ). The offering up of ourselves is an act of dedicating ourself to God. But also it is an action that is to meet God’s requirements for acceptance. God would not always accept the animal sacrifices of ancient Israel, as several of their prophets proclaimed.⁵ These sacrifices had to meet His standards. When we come to God to present ourselves, we must do it God’s way. Otherwise, we will gain no acceptance before God. We can’t offer him the ‘left overs’ of our life. We can’t just give Him our ‘spare time’ while continuing to control the rest of our time. God demands the very best from us. Anything less will not be ‘well pleasing’ to Him.

4) **We offer up a sacrifice as a ‘reasonable service’** (θυσίαν ζῶσαν ἁγίαν εὐάρεστον τῷ θεῷ, τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν ὑμῶν). Considerable discussion is typically devoted to this phrase in most commentaries because of its unusual wording as a qualification of the presenting of our bodies as a sacrifice.⁶ The core word ‘service’ is clearly denoting religious service given to God. Is this ‘spiritual’ service or ‘reasonable’ service? The Greek adjective λογικὴν can mean both. Our commitment to God is indeed a religious commitment. And it is a reasonable commitment. The believing community is not being asked to do unreasonable, or inappropriate things. Such commitment requirements by God are completely reasonable and normal.

Living sacrificially begins with and grows out of the commitment we make to Christ in conversion. It is a serious commitment of oneself to God. Anything less than this will not be accepted by God. Periodically we need to reaffirm this commitment. It must be deepened and developed over time.

⁴This is at the heart of the Christian doctrine of resurrection. In stark contrast to the dualistic thinking of the Graeco-Roman world that saw the ‘escape’ of the soul from the material body as the ultimate goal of life, Christians taught that we are not complete humans without both should and body, and that we can’t exist in eternity without both soul and body in a resurrection life whereby these two entities -- separated by physical death -- are brought back together in a special existence for all eternity.

⁵Cf. Hos. 8:13; Amos 5:22; Micah 6:7; Mal. 1:8, 10, 13.

⁶“One could make similar comparisons with Hebrew and Greek philosophical efforts to transform worship. But Paul does not indulge in polemical contrasts. His use of “reasonable worship,” even though it may have been mediated by the Hellenistic synagogue, signals the desire to set claim to a broad tradition of Greco-Roman as well as Jewish philosophy of religion. In place of the λατρεία of the Jewish cult (9:24) or the worship of finite images in Greco-Roman cults (1:23), Paul presents the bodily service of a community for the sake of world transformation and unification as the fulfillment of the vision of worship that would be truly reasonable. In place of the enlightened individual, touted by Greco-Roman philosophers, there now stands the rationality of a redeemed community committed to world mission. Collective “reason,” not some vague spiritual sentiment, was the crucial requirement of the Spanish mission project with its wide range of intellectual, logistical, and political challenges. With this final phrase, “your [pl.] reasonable worship,” a smooth transition is provided to the theme of the next verse.” [[Robert Jewett, Roy David Kotansky and Eldon Jay Epp, *Romans : A Commentary*, Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 736]]

II. Living sacrificially: how it works, v. 2

2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

12:2 καὶ μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ, ἀλλὰ μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον.

The language of Paul in the biblical text underscores that growing out of the offering of oneself as a living sacrifice in conversion launches an ongoing process of continual transformation of one's life and pattern of living. This process is described from the negative and then the positive angles, but is a single process that is to be taking place in one's life.

On the negative side is a refusal to continue our life being shaped by the standards of this corrupt and sinful world: "Do not be conformed to this world" (καὶ μὴ συσχηματίζεσθε τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ). Literally we are to stop allowing our lives to be 'poured into the mold of the world.' What is the world's mold? Some of the aspects are presented by Paul to the Galatians (Gal. 5:19-21, NRSV):

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

More are defined in Eph. 5:1-9 (NRSV):

1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, 2 and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. 3 But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. 4 Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. 5 Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be associated with them. 8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — 9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Numerous other texts could also be cited, but this presents enough so that one gains a clear picture of how the world wants to shape and mold individuals. Christian conversion means a change in life style. And this change is an ongoing process that will last the rest of our journey through life. Every day we must be sensitive to worldly influences and then resist them.

On positive side, we begin a process of life transformation: "but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (ἀλλὰ μεταμορφοῦσθε τῇ ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοῦς). We are to undergo a 'metamorphosis' in our living. We start out in our sin as an ugly worm, but by God's grace from conversion on we begin turning into a beautiful butterfly. Paul defined this to the Galatians as the 'fruits of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22-24, NRSV):

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

We become new people and this new life is to work its way to the surface and show itself in how we live.

The objective is to grasp more and more God's will: "so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον). Literally, this refusal to conform and being transformed enables us to test out (τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς) God's will so that we realize that it is good, acceptable, and perfect. Out of life experience we come to understand how God wants us to live, and to see just how wonderful this way of living really is.

We must understand what God's will is. This comes through scripture in our understanding. We must understand God's will functionally, that is, in our daily living. How does God want us to live on Monday? What are the correct decisions we should make on Tuesday? How should we treat other people on the job on Wednesday? On and on! Knowing God's will comes out of careful study of the Bible. But it encompasses understanding how to apply it day by day as well.

Out of this comes the realization that doing God's will is good, well-pleasing, and just the right thing (τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον). The unbeliever looks at God's will and scorns, "The Christian life is for morons and for weak, helpless idiots!" The growing believer looks at God's will and exclaims, "This is absolutely the best way to approach life, without question!" Beyond this world, comes the realization that only in God's will is there hope for eternity. Outside of God's will comes eternal damnation. No thinking person would ever opt for eternal torments in the lake of fire throughout eternity. But only those discovering God's will in their life have enough spiritual insight to understand and appreciate this.

CONCLUSION

Living Sacrificially! It considerably more than giving up smoking for the forty days of Lent! How about you? How are you living your life?