

Living Sacrifice

Peter Ditzel

In Romans 12, verses 1-2, Paul writes, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul wrote of the sinfulness of humanity. He explained justification by faith alone in Christ alone. He proclaimed freedom from the tyranny of sin and the condemnation of the law. These are the mercies of God that Paul now mentions here in Romans 12:1. Paul tells them that as a result of these mercies—not to receive these mercies but as a result of them—they are to do two things: 1) They are to present their bodies a "living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God"; and 2) they are to be not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of their minds.

What does it mean to present our bodies a "living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God" and to be not conformed to this world: but instead to be transformed by the renewing of our minds? And what does this mean to you as you work, play, and go about your day-to-day life?

All of Grace

Our salvation from beginning to end is all of grace. In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul writes, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." You cannot work for your salvation. You cannot merit your salvation. You cannot work to make God owe you anything. Yet, in the very next verse, in Ephesians 2:10, Paul says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

The danger that Christians can fall into is to say, Okay, I'm saved. And they stop right there. We need to live our Christianity. And Paul is telling us how to do this.

God's grace saves us. Our works cannot save us. God is doing all of the work. In fact, we are His workmanship. But notice that God is

creating us in Jesus Christ to good works that He has ordained that we should do. Do you see? We are not saved by good works. But in saving us, God is by grace creating us to be creatures who can do the good works He has determined we should do. We are not saved by good works, but we are saved by grace for good works.

There is a story of a young girl who claimed that she trusted in Jesus Christ as her Savior and applied for membership in a church. She was asked some questions. "Were you a sinner before you trusted the Lord Jesus?" inquired an old deacon. "Yes, sir," she replied. "Well, are you still a sinner?" he asked. "To tell you the truth, I feel I'm a greater sinner than ever." "Then what real change have you experienced?" he wondered. "I don't quite know how to explain it," she said, "except I used to be a sinner running after sin, but, now that I am saved, I'm a sinner running from sin!" I think she explained it very well.

This girl was beginning to understand something. The theologian, Gordon Clark, explained it as a change of habit. As Clark says, all the actions of those who are not yet born again are sinful. Because their motives are always evil, those who are not born again continually sin. "Then," writes Clark, "the Holy Spirit comes upon this individual and instills into him different habits. These new habits, though they may and will develop by practice, are not produced by practice. The Spirit immediately forms the habit for him" (Gordon H. Clark, *The Holy Spirit*, [Hobbs, N. Mex.: The Trinity Foundation, 1993], 34).

So, when we are born again, the Holy Spirit gives us new habits. We once ran after sin, but now we run away from it. Sin was once our way of life, but now, when we slip and sin, we abhor it. The Holy Spirit has changed our mind. And, over time, we will develop these habits more and more. While we may have setbacks, in general these good habits will become stronger. This turning from sinful habits to doing what is good, turning from the ways of this sinful world to God's holy ways, is called sanctification. Sanctification is literally a making holy or setting apart for holy use. As Peter explains in 1 Peter 1:15-16, we are to be holy because God is holy.

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Now, going back to Romans 12:1-2, we see that presenting our bodies as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice to God, and not being conformed to this world, is part of our sanctification, God setting us apart from the world as His holy people. But what is our part in this? How do we present our bodies as a living sacrifice?

Being a *living* sacrifice means we are to sacrifice the substance of our lives—our time, efforts, resources, and, yes, when called for, sometimes our lives, as an example of the love of Jesus Christ.

There are many examples of Christians giving their lives for Christ. I want to tell you about four of them during the Second World War.

Boarding the SS Dorchester on a dreary winter day in 1943 were 903 troops and four chaplains. World War II was in full swing, and the ship was headed across the icy North Atlantic where German U-boats lurked. At 12:00 on the morning of February 3, a German torpedo ripped into the ship. "She's going down!" the men cried.

A young GI crept up to one of the chaplains. "I've lost my life jacket," he said. "Take this," the chaplain said, handing the soldier his jacket. Before the ship sank, each chaplain gave his life jacket to another man. The heroic chaplains then linked arms and lifted their voices in prayer as the Dorchester went down. All the pastors were awarded posthumously the Distinguished Service Cross. They had presented their bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.

Sacrificing is Christianity in action. But, judging by the shape Christianity is now in, most of us would rather be spectators. Someone once described a football game as twenty-two men on the field badly in need of rest being watched by seventy-two thousand people in the stands badly in need of exercise. But Christianity is not supposed to be a spectator sport.

Jesus said, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it." No doubt with this in mind, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." If you know of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you may not agree with all of his theology, and neither do I. But you cannot fault the man in one area. He was not a spectator Christian. He was a participant. When the rest of the church in Germany was caving in and kissing up to Hitler and the Nazis, Bonhoeffer stood relatively alone and resisted. He spoke out against the Nazis and was eventually put into a concentration camp. Shortly before the end of the war, the Nazis executed him by hanging.

What are you sacrificing? When you live for yourself, even when you call yourself a Christian, you do nothing that is inconvenient. You don't have time to serve in church, but you have time for entertainment.

You give only what you can spare without missing it. I once heard a preacher rightly say that God does not want your leftovers. God wants sacrifice, and sacrifice hurts.

Now you have probably heard of the incident where Jesus and His disciples were watching people giving their offerings into the collection box in the temple. The rich people, giving out of their wealth, put in a lot, but it didn't hurt them because they were rich. Whatever they gave, they wouldn't even miss it. But then, along came a poor widow. She threw in two, small copper coins that were worth almost nothing. And Jesus said she gave more than all the others. Why? Because they gave out of their abundance, but she, in her poverty, gave "all that she had, even all her living." They gave their leftovers, but she gave everything.

I have heard people say that the widow's heart may have been right, but she was foolish. She should not have given everything. She was wrong to do this, and she probably regretted it later. But Jesus doesn't say this. Jesus' comments about her do not even hint of criticism. He holds her up as a shining example of a living sacrifice. And I am certain she did not regret what she did.

There was a Christian physician in Bangalore, India. While others in his field drove expensive sports cars, he drove a broken down vehicle and lived in a small house that had no hot running water. On Sundays, he held church services in a lean-to shack made of scrap boards and raw lumber. Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton write, "The faithful walked, limped, and dragged themselves to that mat-covered room to worship.... It was poverty at its most extreme. The people listened to the sermon, sang, prayed, and had communion. Then they did an astonishing thing. They gave their money. Having almost nothing, they gave very little, but the percentage of their earnings that went to God was extraordinarily high." (Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith*, [Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver-Nelson Books, 1991] 61). Why did these people do this? Why did they sacrifice so much? Because they saw what so many of us living in the affluent and, so called, Christian world have become jaded to. They saw Christianity as the light in a very dark world. These people, and Christians like them, give because they love God, because they put their money where their hearts are.

And, of course, money is not the only way to sacrifice. Let me give you another example from Asia. Eric Fellman speaks of meeting a Chinese couple in Hong Kong, while traveling to China. Fellman writes,

A friend took me down a narrow alley to a second-floor flat to meet a man recently released from prison in China. I knew I would be pressed to carry Bibles and literature on my trip. But I was hesitant and tried to mask my fear with rationalizations about legalities and other concerns.

A Chinese man in his 60s opened the door. His smile was radiant, but his back was bent almost double. He led us to a sparsely furnished room. A Chinese woman of about the same age came in to serve tea. As she lingered, I couldn't help but notice how they touched and lovingly looked at each other. My staring apparently didn't go unnoticed, for soon they were both giggling. "What is it?" I asked my friend. "Oh nothing," he said with a smile. "They just wanted you to know it was OK—they're newlyweds." I learned they had been engaged in 1949, when he was a student at Nanking Seminary. On the day of their wedding rehearsal, Chinese communists seized the seminary. They took the students to a hard-labor prison. For the next 30 years, the bride-to-be was allowed only one visit per year. Each time, following their brief minutes together, the man would be called to the warden's office. "You may go home with your bride," he said, "if you will renounce Christianity." Year after year, this man replied with just one word; "No." I was stunned. How had he been able to stand the strain for so long, being denied his family, his marriage, and even his health? When I asked, he seemed astonished at my question. He replied, "With all that Jesus has done for me, how could I betray Him?" The next day, I requested that my suitcase be crammed with Bibles and training literature for Chinese Christians. I determined not to lie about the materials, yet lost not one minute of sleep worrying about the consequences. And as God had planned, my suitcases were never inspected."

Eric Fellman, *Moody Monthly*, January 1986, 33

Are we taking for granted what Jesus Christ has done for us?

In Luke 17:11-18, we read,

And it happened while He [Jesus] was traveling to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood at a

distance. And they lifted their voice and said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" And seeing them, He said to them, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And so it was that as they went away, they were cleansed. And one of them, seeing that he was healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, and fell down on his face at His feet, thanking Him. And he was a Samaritan. So Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were not any found returning to give glory to God except this foreigner?"

English Majority Text Version

Yes, our salvation is totally free. God gives it to us by grace. And, yes, all ten lepers were healed. But Paul, in Romans 12:1, is telling us we should be like the one leper who came to Christ and thanked Him. How much of your life have you sacrificed for Jesus Christ? How much of your time have you devoted for prayer, reading the Bible, serving your church, or helping your neighbor? How much of your money and other resources have you given? How much of a true sacrifice, one that hurts, are you making?

Now, I am not trying to lay guilt on you. That would be very wrong. How you answer the questions I have asked is between you and God. And I don't believe God would have us dwell on the past. If you don't believe you have done enough, now is the time to start doing more. It is really that simple. My job is to remind you, exhort you, encourage you, and "beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."

Paul goes on in Romans 12:2: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

The *English Majority Text Version* says, "And do not fashion yourselves after this world." In other words, do not take on the pattern or likeness of the world. The Greek word is *aion*. It means the age, the age in which we live, this sinful age as opposed to the age to come. The pattern of this world means its cares, its wisdom, its rulers, its fashion, and so on. As Christians, we are not to pattern ourselves after the world. We are to be different. Remember, God is setting us apart as holy. He is setting us apart from the world around us that is unholy.

Jesus prayed concerning His disciples and all those who would follow them, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but

that thou shouldest keep them from the evil." Yes, we are in this world, but we are not to be of it. We need to look into our Bibles and find God's standards for living. And then we need to conform to God's standards and not the world's standards.

Yes, it is a sacrifice. It takes courage. You have to be brave to look, act, and speak differently than the world. But it is your reasonable service. How do you do it? Paul tells us, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." The combination of the Holy Spirit working in us and our taking the Word of God into our minds by reading the Bible should change us. Our values should change from the world's to God's.

What does the world value? What motivates it? Money, greed, power, illicit sex, possessions, seeking after entertainment, comfort, idolizing entertainers and sports stars, just to name a few things. But, while your natural desires might still want to go after these things, the new creature that God is creating in you enables you to put off "your former way of life, the old man which is being corrupted according to the deceitful lusts" and to "be renewed in the spirit of your mind" and "put on the new man which was created in the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness."

Noah was ridiculed by all around him. Abraham was a stranger and sojourner on the earth. Daniel and his three friends dined alone. Jeremiah prophesied and wept alone. Jesus' disciples fled and even Peter denied Him. Paul said, "no man stood with me, but all men forsook me." But none of them gave up. Peter tells us, "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul."

Scripture after Scripture tells us Christians are to be set apart from the world. As just one example, in 2 Corinthians 6, beginning with verse 14, we read, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" There can be no agreement between believers and unbelievers, and we are to be separate. The text goes on, "And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

But is this what we see today? Not usually. In general, we see the church lowering itself to the world's standards of behavior on the pretext that it is winning souls to Christ. What is really happening when Christians do that is the devil is winning the church to the world. And the church then attracts many self-righteous people who want to think good of themselves for attending church and talking about Jesus while hanging onto their worldly ways. But Paul tells us that "those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts." Christians who understand what God expects of them, what I am now telling you, will not be attracted to worldly enticements. They will want to live in the Spirit and walk in the Spirit.

Christians are to be so noticeably different from the world that they stand out as a light. Jesus called both Himself and His followers the light of the world. In Matthew 5:14-16, speaking of His followers, He said, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." The world is in darkness. A light contrasts completely with darkness. Because there is such a difference, it stands out and is very visible. This light, the light of Jesus Christ shining through His followers, will attract the sinners God is calling out of the darkness of the world.

Are you so different that it is noticeable? If Christianity suddenly became illegal and you were brought before a judge, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Have you taken up your cross? Are you following Jesus Christ? Or are you still very much in the world? James says that whoever will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

Do you spend more of your time reading your Bible? or watching television? Are you praying? or playing video games? Are you speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord? or listening to that rock beat (whether it is in music that is openly secular or is disguised in so-called Christian Contemporary Music)?

Are you giving thanks always? or grumbling? Are you dressing "in modest apparel, with propriety and discretion, not with braids or gold or pearls or expensive clothing" as the Bible directs? or are you letting your bottom hang out and getting your body pierced and tattooed in every conceivable place? Are you remaining chaste before marriage

and faithful after marriage in both body and mind? or are you making a mockery of the relationship between Christ and the church that marriage pictures? Do you, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven"? or do you hate your enemies, return curses for curses, and plot against those who mistreat you?

Do you obey and honor your parents? or do you ignore them as old fashioned, not understanding, or even stupid? Do you avoid provoking your children to wrath? or do you always let it all fly, excusing your unbridled anger because your kids are so aggravating? Wives, do you submit to your husbands as unto the Lord? or do you listen to the anti-Christian feminists who say that to do so is degrading and that Paul was a frustrated male chauvinist? Husbands, do you love your wives as Christ loved the church? or is it obvious that you love your work, your golf or fishing, your car, or something else more?

Maybe what I have said is discouraging. You feel you could never live up to it. But there is no time like the present to repent. And I am not telling you to do any of this on your own power. If you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, God will enable you to do these things, if you look to Him for your strength. Pray! Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Just as you trusted in Christ as your Savior at the beginning of your salvation, continue to trust Him now for your sanctification. As Paul wrote, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."