

THE SACRIFICIAL LIFE

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." (Romans 12:1)

Under the law of Moses the bodies of animals were sacrificed as burnt offerings unto the Lord, but here the apostle declares that in our present dispensation God makes the demand that our bodies be offered to Him in humble sacrifice--that they be dedicated to Him obediently and devotedly. The entire animal was offered--the Jew released all claims to it and left it to be used to the honor and glory of God. Likewise he who offers his own body today releases all claim to it. Hence the body is the instrument by which human sacrifice is rendered unto God. Paul said, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." (Romans 6:12-13)

Not only should the body be presented in humble obedience unto God; but the entire being--the complete life should be devoted to the cause of righteousness. Paul in reminding us that we are not our own, said "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." (I Corinthians 6:20)

We belong to the Lord by virtue of a three-fold claim. We are His by right of creation, for He made us in His own image; we are Christ's by right of redemption, He died to redeem us; we are His by right of preservation, for we are kept from the power of evil in the measure that we keep ourselves in His love. (Read Jude 20, 24) Therefore a dedicated life is our "reasonable service."

Whenever life is dedicated to a cause that cause is likely to be carried forward triumphantly. If a man withholds himself from a given cause, if he gives it little of his attention and energies, if he makes it secondary in his life, that cause will fail insofar as he personally is concerned. This explains why many men fail. They touch their problems in life so lightly; their hearts, their deepest loyalties and highest devotions are not put into the cause at all. This principle can be applied in a universal way. Let a student take hold of his studies just a little bit, just barely enough to pass, and the chances are that he will go limping down through life greatly handicapped by the lack of a necessary preparation. If a man goes to work whatever his work may be, counting the hours and the minutes until he punches the clock at the close of the day, it is bad for that man. But let a man give his best to his job and there is always a better job demanding his skill.

This principle is supremely true in the business of serving the Lord. There can be no substitute for the dedication of self to Christ. "I seek not your's, but you", was not only Paul's great concern for his brethren, but the same holds true with reference to Christ's great yearning for our souls. Christ is still saying, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." (Luke 9:23-24)

In the text Paul sets forth the characteristics of this sacrifice. Let us now study them.

First, this sacrifice is "a living sacrifice." Under the law the Jew offered his victim, slew it and presented it dead. In opposition to that we are to present ourselves with all our energies. Jesus said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind." (Luke 10:27) Life comes from God, "For in him we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:28) Therefore it is right that our lives should be given to Him in return. The expression "living sacrifice", also carries the idea of a continual sacrifice. Discipleship with Jesus requires perseverance. Jesus said, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved." (Matthew 10:22) Hence there is no discharge from this service, there is no vacation or retiring, for it is a life-time contract.

Second, this is a "holy" sacrifice--that is, without blemish or defect. No other kind of a sacrifice is acceptable unto God. The Jews were expressly forbidden to offer unto God any animal which was lame, blind, or in any way deformed. God said to the Jews, "And if there be any blemish therein, as if it be lame, or blind, or have any ill blemish, thou shalt not sacrifice it unto the Lord thy God." (Deuteronomy 15:21) In like manner today we are to consecrate to God our best minds, affections, talents and time. Our sacrifice is not to be a divided one. God will have the only service of our lives, or He will have none. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." (Matthew 4:10) Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will have the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other." (Matthew 6:24) Again the Lord has said, "He that is not with me is against me." (Matthew 12:30) Therefore our service in the Master's cause is to be entire and complete. The lamb of God, who was offered for our sins, was an offering "without blemish and without spot" (I Peter 1:19); hence we should so present ourselves unto Him. Peter said to all Christians, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation." (I Peter 1:15)

Third, in the text Paul assures us that such a "living" and "holy" sacrifice will be "acceptable unto God." The odor of burnt sacrifices was pleasing unto God. (Read Exodus 29:25).

Also the offering of the lamb of God was a sacrifice that was unto Jehovah "a sweet-smelling savour". (Ephesians 5:2) No sacrifice should be made unto God that would not be pleasing in His sight. Only those services which God appoints will be acceptable unto Him. Jesus said concerning the Pharisees, "But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." (Matthew 15:9) The offerings of the heathen, the sacrifices of the Mohammedans, the self-inflicted penalties of other religionists, uncommanded of God, cannot be acceptable unto God. Men are not to invent services, or ordain ordinances, which God has not required or authorized. To be acceptable unto God is the highest recompense that we can have. To please Him should be our greatest desire. It matters little what men may think of us if God approves what we do. Peter said, "And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good?" (I Peter 3:13) Also Solomon said, "When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him." (Proverbs 16:7)

Fourth, in the text Paul reminds us that a "living" and "holy" sacrifice is not only "acceptable unto God", but also such an offering is our "reasonable service". The word "reasonable", according to Webster, means "Governed by reason; just; rational; not excessive or immoderate; equitable; fair."

Hence this sacrifice is a "rational" one. Under the law of Moses irrational victims were offered unto God. Their wills were not consulted. But Christ, our Sacrifice for sin, was offered as a rational Being. Jesus said, "I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down, and I have power to take it again." (John 10:17-18) Likewise under the gospel of Christ the sacrifice of rational beings is made--a sacrifice which involves every faculty of the mind, the intellect, the affection and the will.

Also as a "reasonable service", this sacrifice which the Lord demands today is "equitable and fair; not excessive or immoderate." John said, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and his commandments are not grievous." (I John 5:3) That is, they are not difficult to be borne. Jesus said, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:30) The demands of our Saviour are not unreasonable; the duties which He requires are not beyond our ability. His government is not oppressive and tyrannical. It is easy to obey the Lord when the heart is right, and those who endeavor in all earnestness to keep His commandments do not complain that they are too hard and exacting. Those who are true soldiers of the cross find God's service easier than the service of sin, and the laws of God easy and mild as compared to those of Satan. The service of Christ tends to bring us freedom, while the service of Satan tends to bring us into bondage. No man ever heard a true Christian say that the laws of God, requiring him to lead a holy and righteous life, were stern and grievous.

For this word "reasonable", the word "spiritual" is supplied in the footnote of the Revised Version. To be sure this "reasonable service" which the Lord requires of us today is a "spiritual service". It involves the spiritual entity of man. It should, therefore, be entered into in the right spirit. There was always present the danger that the sacrifices of Judaism be offered without the right spirit in the heart of the one making such an offering. Generations of Hebrew prophets rose up in warning of this danger. God through Moses said to His people, "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Moses 6:6) Micah the prophet spake these words: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:7-8)

This ancient temptation to substitute the sacrament of the temple for the sacrament of the life remains with us mortals today. How easy it is for us to give worthy acts of religion, like church attendance, contributions of time and money, and the offering of prayers, without giving ourselves to God. But let us remember that

"Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare."

Let us cease thinking so much about what we can expect from God and think more of what He can expect from us. He does not ask death of us, but He asks rather a life of devotion and service. The only death that He would require of us is a death to sin, and a willingness to serve Him even if we have to die for His blessed cause.

David said, "Neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which cost me nothing." (II Samuel 24:24) Let us make our religion cost us something. Think of what our salvation cost God. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) Think of what our redemption cost Christ. "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." (II Corinthians 8:9)

Then let us "present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service."

"I gave my life for thee,
My precious blood I shed,
That thou might'st ransomed be,
And quickened from the dead;
I gave, I gave my life for thee,
What hast thou given for me?"