

Sacrifices

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There are many Biblical ideas that are unpopular in American society, and one of those ideas is the concept of sacrifice. This is particularly obvious in an election year. Poll after poll reveals that in the abstract, the American people wants the federal government to cut spending. In the abstract, they want a balanced budget. However, once the pollsters start asking their subjects about specific items in the budget, the picture changes. Americans don't want to see defense spending cut, or Social Security cut, or Medicare cut, or anything else cut. They like the goal of a balanced budget, but they aren't willing to give up anything in order to get there. In other words, they aren't willing to sacrifice.

Sacrifice in the Bible, of course, is much more narrowly defined than that. Without exception, when the Scripture discusses sacrifice, it refers to something that is offered to God. However, many people in our country have the same problem with God that they do with a balanced budget. They claim they want to please God. They claim that they want to glorify Him in their lives. However, they aren't willing to surrender anything they value to get there either.

Nor is this problem limited to people in the world. There are plenty of Christians who are unwilling to offer sacrifice to God too. The sacrifices that they do offer, they offer in a grudging, halfhearted, and inadequate fashion. This is a problem that can befall any of us. We need to be on guard against it, and we need to constantly improve both the quantity and the quality of the sacrifices that we do present to Him. This morning, then, let's consider sacrifices.

Principles of Sacrifice

If we want to properly appreciate anything that the Scripture specifically says about sacrifices, we first need to develop a top-down appreciation of what a sacrifice is supposed to be generally. Let's begin this process by examining the first sacrifice that the Scripture describes in detail, so that we can get **A BASIC IDEA** of what sacrifice is about. Let's read together from Genesis 8:20-21. In context, this event takes place after Noah has disembarked from the ark after the flood. In order to express his appreciation to God, he sacrifices some of the clean animals that were on the ark.

There are a couple of things that we can learn from this incident. First, we see that the purpose of Biblical sacrifice is to find favor with God. In this case, God was pleased by Noah's display of piety and resolved that He would never again destroy the world by water. Sacrifice is ultimately about pleasing God. It is not about pleasing ourselves.

Second, it is clear from the text that Noah had received instruction about the sacrifice before he offered it. Noah didn't come up with the idea that certain animals were clean on his own; instead, that was something that God had revealed to him. Noah, then, was offering the sacrifices that God had said He wanted. In the same way, we don't get to decide what things we ought to surrender to God. Right now, we're in the middle of the season of Lent, and I have to say, Lent makes no sense to me as a religious custom. If God has said in His word that He doesn't want me to do something, He doesn't ever want me to do it, and if I only give up that thing for 40 days a year, I'm sinning for the other 325. On the other hand, if God hasn't condemned something in His word, I know He's indifferent to the practice, and it's ridiculous for me to act like I'm doing some good work by giving up this thing that God doesn't care about.

In order for a sacrifice to be pleasing to God, it must also be **UNBLEMISHED**. There are many passages in Scripture that express this requirement. By way of illustration, let's look at Leviticus 1:3. The temptation that this passage is meant to address is obvious. When an Israelite offered an animal to be sacrificed, he didn't get the animal back after the sacrifice was over, and sometimes, he didn't even get any of the meat. In other words, sacrifice meant economic loss. In those circumstances, the natural human reaction is to minimize the loss as much as possible by offering as crummy an animal as possible. As long as the poor sheep could stagger up to the altar before it died, you were good.

The requirement that sacrifices be unblemished put the kibosh on this whole scheme. God wanted His people to understand that His worship wasn't about aiming for the minimum, so that they could check the God box off and go on their way. Instead, worship called for the very best they had to give. It was true for the Israelites, and it's true for us.

As an extension of this idea, the Old Testament also indicates that God expects His sacrifices to be **OFFERED WHOLEHEARTEDLY**. Let's look, for instance, at Malachi 1:13. This describes a problem that we've already explored—the problem of offering blemished sacrifices, despite divine instructions not to. However, Malachi also goes one step further and diagnoses the heart condition that led to the worthless sacrifice. The people were showing up with these decrepit animals because they regarded the worship of the Lord as a boring exercise that wasn't worthy of their time.

Brethren, that is a deadly spiritual attitude, and we need to make sure that it doesn't crop up in us. The point here is not that the preaching or the songleading or any other element of our assembly is above improvement. We all need input from others if we want to become the best servants of God that we can possibly be. That's one thing. It's another thing entirely, though, when we claim that some element of the worship service has prevented us from worshiping, or we regard the worship as boring, or we would rather be doing something other than worshiping. When we say or think things like that, the problem is not external. It is internal. If we are that reluctant to worship, or that easily prevented

from worshiping, we have fallen prey to the same apathetic spirit that characterized the people of Malachi's day. We are offering blemished sacrifices from a blemished heart, and sacrifices like that can never be pleasing to God.

Similarly, we must recognize that sacrifices **COME WITH A COST**. This is beautifully illustrated by the words of David in 1 Chronicles 21:23-24. In context, David has incurred the wrath of God by sinfully conducting a census. He has come to the threshing floor of Ornan to offer a sacrifice to soothe God's anger. Ornan sees what David is about to do and offers his king everything he needs for the sacrifice, free of charge. David refuses, even though he will end up sacrificing the very oxen Ornan has offered to give him. He says he won't offer anything to the Lord that didn't cost him.

In the same way, friends, the sacrifices that we offer should cost us. This is a logical consequence of offering our best, because in order for something to be our best, we have to invest ourselves in it. This is true in any walk of life. If a basketball team doesn't practice, it's going to get out on the court and play a sloppy game of basketball. It won't be that team's best. If a preacher doesn't spend hours in study and preparation and practice before he preaches, when he gets up in the pulpit, that lack of investment is going to show. The sermon won't be his best. If we give on the first day of the week, but our contribution is so insignificant that we don't really notice its effect on our budget, we aren't giving our best. This doesn't mean that sacrifices must be grudging and painful. After all, we can and should gladly give of our best to the Lord. However, after we offer anything to Him, we should feel the absence of what we have given. It should cost us.

Finally, in spiritual importance, sacrifices **FOLLOW OBEDIENCE**. Samuel famously makes this observation in 1 Samuel 15:22. God had commanded King Saul to conquer the Amalekites and destroy everything that belonged to them. Instead, Saul spared Agag the Amalekite king and the very best of the Amalekite flocks and herds. When Samuel confronted Saul about his sin, Saul pleaded that he had only spared the animals to sacrifice them to the Lord. In response, Samuel points out that God isn't interested in our sacrifices if our lives aren't right with Him.

This is no less true today than it was 3000 years ago. God can't be bought. If we think that we can live lives of willful sin, and then waltz in here and sing so beautifully or give so generously that God won't care about the sin, we could not be more wrong. God is disgusted by such rank hypocrisy. He sees through our pretense of worship to the tale that our lives tell, which is that we don't really care about Him. Only the righteous can offer Him true sacrifices.

The Sacrifice of Jesus

These principles apply to any sacrifice mentioned in Scripture, but the greatest sacrifice of all is the sacrifice of Jesus. Whereas all of the sacrifices described in the Old Testament were of something external, the sacrifice that Jesus offered was **HIS BODY**. Look with me at Hebrews 10:5-7. Notice that the Hebrews writer emphasizes that this was Jesus' intention from the moment that He came into the world. From the very beginning, Jesus' goal was to offer Himself as a sacrifice. His own life was the price that He was willing to pay for our salvation. This shows how much we owe our Lord, and it also highlights a problem with the false doctrine of premillennialism. Premillennialist teaching holds that when Jesus came to earth, He intended to reign as an earthly king in Jerusalem, and that His enemies somehow defeated that plan by crucifying Him. This is a gross distortion of Scripture. Jesus' purpose on earth was never to alter the political situation of a tiny nation in the Middle East. He came to offer Himself for the benefit of all mankind.

Second, the sacrifice that Jesus offered was **UNBLEMISHED**. When I say this, I don't mean that Jesus was physically perfect. I mean that He was spiritually perfect. This concept is presented most plainly in Hebrews 4:15. The devil didn't leave Jesus alone when He was on the earth. Instead, the devil gave the Lord just as much grief as he gives any of us, and maybe more. The difference between Jesus and us is that where all of us have given in to temptation, Jesus never did. This fulfilled two of the requirements that we considered in the first part of this lesson. Just like the Israelites were to offer God the very best of their flocks and herds, Jesus offered God a life that was the very best life that could be lived, unblemished by even a single sin. Second, it meant that Jesus' perfect sacrifice followed perfect obedience. Jesus never did a single thing that would cause God to turn away and refuse to accept the sacrifice that He offered.

Third, Jesus offered this sacrifice **ON THE CROSS**. This too was part of Jesus' plan from the very beginning. Look, for example, at what He says the week before He was crucified in John 12:32:33. To the crowd who heard Jesus utter these words, this probably sounded impressive. It reminds me of what happens when the kicker in football kicks a game-winning field goal. His teammates lift him up and carry him off the field. However, that wasn't what Jesus was talking about. He didn't foresee being lifted up in glory and honor. He foresaw being lifted up in shame and disgrace, nailed to a cross as a man who was deserving of nothing better than a lingering and painful death. He foresaw a fate that any of us would do just about anything to avoid. However, Jesus didn't avoid it. He set His face toward Jerusalem, and with grim determination, He did everything that the Father asked Him to do, knowing full well that His death would be the result. This is why the Scripture describes Jesus as both the high priest and the sacrifice. Sure, Jesus was nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men, but it was His obedience to the will of God that put Him there. He died because He chose to. He offered His own life as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross because no other sacrifice would do.

However, the effect of this great sacrifice was to purchase **FORGIVENESS OF SINS**. The Hebrews writer emphasizes this idea in Hebrews 10:12-14. In all the history of the world, before or since, there has never been a more

spiritually significant act than the sacrifice of Jesus. For 1500 years, the Israelites attempted to purchase forgiveness for their sins by sacrificing countless bulls and goats. Not one of those attempts accomplished its goal. However, by the sacrifice of His own perfect life, Jesus accomplished in one day what all the rest of mankind put together could never accomplish. With His blood, He bought redemption for all the faithful Jews who lived under the old covenant, for all the God-fearing Gentiles of every nation who had lived and died in faith, and for every believer, whether born or unborn, who would call on His name through baptism, making their appeal for a good conscience to Him. I don't have a clue how many people this involves, but the Scripture teaches that the sacrifice of Jesus is great enough to save them all.

Finally, we need to consider the motivation behind this sacrifice. There's no mystery about this. The word teaches that Jesus offered Himself **OUT OF LOVE**. Look, for instance, at 1 John 4:10. This passage describes the Father's motivation in sending His Son to earth to die, but it captures the attitude of the Son too. The way that we treat God is not a shining example of love. Even the best Christians don't give God what He deserves from us. We claim that we love Him and then spend far too much time living in a way that shows that we love ourselves. When we consider the actions of God and Jesus, though, there's not an ounce of selfishness in any of them. The life and death of our Lord were about others, not Himself. That's the way we should be, but it's the way that He truly was. Because of this, every Christian here owes Him a debt that we will never be able to repay. We can't compensate Him for a sacrifice like that. All we can do is honor Him for it. Let's remember this and examine ourselves now as we partake of the Lord's Supper.

Our Sacrifices

As we saw a few moments ago, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was the final sacrifice for sin. No other will ever be necessary. However, there are still other spiritual sacrifices that God expects us to offer. The first of these is the sacrifice of **PRAISE**. The Hebrews writer spells this out in Hebrews 13:15. There are several points in this passage worth noting. First, God and Jesus are certainly deserving of our praise, and they expect us to give it to them. Second, they expect this praise to be offered sacrificially, which means that all of the Scriptural principles concerning sacrifice apply to it. We can't show up at the church building, mechanically stumble our way through a few hymns, go home, and expect God to be pleased with us. Instead, the worship that we offer to Him must be the very best worship that we have to offer. We need to present ourselves before Him prepared to offer our best, and to put our heart and soul into it.

Finally, notice that this text specifies that this sacrifice is to be the fruit of our lips. We can't refuse to sing and think that somehow, our silence praises God. The participation of every Christian in this sacrifice is commanded. Likewise, if we were to bring instruments of music into the assembly, the sound made by those instruments would not be the fruit of our lips either. It would not be the sacrifice commanded by God. In Genesis 4, when Cain offered a sacrifice that God had not commanded, God had no regard for His offering. If we choose to offer a sacrifice today that God has not commanded, why would we expect Him to have regard for ours? Let us honor Him in the way He has prescribed.

In the same context, we are encouraged to offer the sacrifices of **DOING GOOD AND SHARING**. This is taught in Hebrews 13:16. I love the way that the Hebrews writer brings balance to the previous verse by what he says here, and it's a balance that the Lord's people need to understand. We must recognize that the fitness of the sacrifices we offer in the assembly does not absolve us from our responsibility to live for Jesus outside the assembly too. I have known Christians before who were very proud of worshiping in a church that didn't use the instrument, but in their dealings with their brother and their neighbor, they were just as mean-spirited and spiteful as they could be. That's not the way Jesus was, and it can't be the way that we are either. Our Lord rejoices when He sees us taking time out of our busy schedule to help others, or when we share what we have with others in need. Sometimes, we encounter people who need financial help. More commonly, we encounter those who need the gospel. Regardless of which of these is the case, the generous Christian is always going to be willing to share. Sacrifices like these find favor with the Lord.

Third, the Scripture commends to us the sacrifice of **GIVING**. Paul speaks to this in Philippians 4:18. It is certainly true that there are false teachers out there who use passages like this to turn godliness into a means of gain. They preach what they preach to induce their hearers to give them a check. As Jesus says of people like that, they have their reward in full, because they certainly aren't going to see any reward for their actions in the life to come.

However, we shouldn't allow the bad example of these false teachers to drive us away from the topic of what the Scripture does say about giving. Our collection for the Lord's work is not some shameful thing. Instead, it is one of the spiritual sacrifices that the Scripture commands us to offer. As with all the rest of our sacrifices, our giving must be done sacrificially. We should make sure that it is our best that is being returned to the Lord, that we are not allowing our disdain for His work to diminish our generosity, and that our contribution comes at a personal cost to us. I would never dare to tell a brother what dollar amount his contribution should be. The word doesn't allow that. However, it's no secret to any of us who can read the attendance board that the contributions of the church as a whole aren't enough to cover even our daily expenses. I've had conversations with more than one brother about whether we are going to discontinue our support for outside preachers at the end of the year. If we're in this situation because all of our members are giving sacrificially, but we don't have much to give, that's one thing. However, if we are spending our income on

ourselves first, and the Lord is getting the pocket lint, that's another thing. I don't have the foggiest idea who here gives what, and what anyone should be giving. However, each one of us knows the truth about ourselves, and so does the Lord. He's given us everything we have. We need to make sure that we are giving Him a return that honors Him.

Next, let's consider the spiritual sacrifice of **SELF-CONTROL**. Read with me from 1 Peter 2:5, 11. Here in v. 5, Peter tells us that we have been consecrated as priests to offer these spiritual sacrifices. However, Peter doesn't reveal anything about the sacrifices we are to offer until he gets down to v. 11. There, we learn that we are to abstain not just from physical, active sin, but even from the lusts that war against the soul. We offer sacrifice by controlling not just our bodies, but our minds. There must be things in our lives that we would otherwise pursue that we reject for the Lord's sake. Let me give you an example. As all of you have figured out by now, I'm a pretty restrained guy. Because of that, I'm confident that even if I were an atheist, I wouldn't be much tempted by drunkenness. By nature, I'm simply not inclined to unrestrained revelry. It's no sacrifice for me, then, to not be a drunk as a Christian. However, when I avoid the sins that do tempt me, that I would engage in outside of Christ, that is when I offer a sacrifice that pleases Him.

Finally, the Scripture calls us to sacrifice **OURSELVES**. Paul famously makes this point in Romans 12:1. In our daily walk, our sacrifices aren't only about the thou-shalt-not's. They're about the thou-shalt's too. Just as there are things that God expects us not to do, there are things that He expects us to do. Once again, some of these things come easily. There are Christians who are by nature very warm, cheerful people. My wife is one of those people. I am not. As a consequence, she is naturally very kind and considerate in her dealings with others. I am not. If I weren't a Christian, that probably means that I would go through my life being a jerk. However, because I am a Christian, that option isn't open to me. I have to learn to please God, especially in the areas where I would not naturally be righteous. This is to be my reasonable service—the goal that my mind fixes on each day. This is the sacrifice that God desires.