

“A Living Sacrifice”

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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. ²Do 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. ...

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12: 1-2, 9-18)

Throughout biblical history, sacrifices have been expressions of hope -- offerings made in the hope that things might change for the better: that guilt would be forgiven, that God would draw nearer, that shared expressions of faith would bring the community closer together. While Paul is clearly drawing upon Old Testament history in his letter to the Romans, his encounter with the risen Christ has obviously changed his perspective. Now, instead of placing a lamb, bull, or burning incense on the sacrificial altar, faithful people are being asked to offer up a different kind of gift... one patterned after the One who, in Paul's words, "gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."¹ According to Paul, every disciple – indeed, every faithful person -- should offer *themselves* up as a sacrificial offering to God

But what exactly does Paul mean when he challenges us to present our ourselves “*as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*”? Just from these two biblical paragraphs, it is clear that, for Paul, a living sacrifice of faith is a holistic act – an offering that demands something of the body, the mind, and the spirit. And while it does not necessarily mean that this kind of offering demands that we lay down our very lives, the possibility that it may mean that is not, if I may make a bad pun, clearly taken off the table. So, let's break down what Paul seems to have in mind.

1) First, a living sacrifice requires a **housecleaning of the mind**. “*Do not be conformed to this world,*” Paul says, “*but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*” To understand where Paul is going with this, I want you to picture your life as a house, a physical space where you live. That home space is not empty. There is stuff in there that we have accumulated over time. It's walls are adorned with love that we have received. It is furnished with lessons we have learned, skills we have acquired, and blessings we have been given. We can also see evidence of wear and tear, some scars and bruises. There is also some baggage stashed here and there, burdens we picked up during difficult times.

¹ Ephesians 5:2. See also Galatians 2:20.



And most of this stuff – both the good and the bad -- gets comfortable over time. We get used to having good things and we want to hold onto them. Even the bad things, we learn to live with those, too. We cram what we can in closets so we don't have to see it *every* day. But even the clunky stuff that is not so easy to move or ignore – we navigate around that, too. Over time, it can all get comfortable.

So, when Paul says we need to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds,” he is explaining that we all have some housecleaning to do. We are all holding onto some things that are just not healthy or helpful for us. These obstacles are holding us back, preventing us from being the most faithful versions of ourselves. Figure out what those things are, Paul tells us. And then haul them out. Put them out at the street. Send them to the dump.

And, if we are looking for a starting point for our own mental and emotional housecleaning, Paul's list is a great place to begin. There is plenty to keep us busy right here in one paragraph. For example, ***“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.”*** Are we, at times, a little fake in how we relate to others? Can even our efforts at charity be a little self-serving? Do we sometimes shy away from praising something we know to be good, or criticizing something that is obviously bad, because someone might get angry with us for doing so?

Or how about this one: ***“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”*** Have we gotten a little lazy about our spiritual commitments? Maybe we are exhausted, because we are getting zealous over the wrong things. But are we ardent enough about things that truly matter, like connecting with God and serving those in need?

“Be patient in suffering,” Paul says. Patience has become a lost art in our world. Anything we want should be right at our fingertips. Brought right to our doors. Same day delivery. But a lot of the things that are most valuable and worthwhile in this life take time and effort to bring about.

And the list goes on: ***“Persevere in prayer” ... “contribute to the needs of the saints.”*** How are we doing on those? Or ***“Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but... so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*** Anybody in here nursing any grudges? Any multi-decade ones? I get it we can get comfortable even with old resentments. But as spiritual guru Anne Lamott has said, “Not forgiving [someone] is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.” This is exactly the kind of thing Paul knows we need to clean out. The negative, counterproductive clutter in our minds needs to go.

2) But a faithful offering of ourselves is more than a mental exercise. We can't just think good thoughts; we have to convert them into real, physical action. Paul says it clearly, ***“present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”***

The late Scottish pastor George Macleod, who inspired and led the effort transform an abandoned medieval abbey on the island of Iona into the centerpiece of a world-renowned spiritual community, once told a story about a terrible drought. Thousands of farmers and businesses were facing financial ruin. Someone decided that a church service was needed, so everyone could pray for rain. And the people came from all over – in horse-drawn buggies, old Fords, and more modern Land Rovers. But oddly enough, no one brought an umbrella, no one except for one little girl. She was confident, but apparently she was the only one... the only one who believed that it was really going to rain.²

² *Daily Readings with George Macleod*, Ed. Ron Ferguson (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publishing 1991), pp. 100-1. From a sermon preached in August 1953.

In that story, Macleod found a lesson for his life and ministry. His congregation on the outskirts of Glasgow was actively engaged trying to alleviate the terrible poverty and social decay of the 1930's. Much of their work was with older boys who were in and out of juvenile detention homes. One day, one of them came to the church. He had been promised a job in a faraway town, but he would need a new pair of overalls, a train ticket, and money for a week's lodging before his first paycheck came in. Macleod had a choice. He could go the safe route -- buying the overalls and the train ticket, then getting a minister at the destination to arrange a week's lodging. Or he could trust the young man with the money.

Macleod knew that trusting a boy with a record of thievery was risky. But he also knew that, if he did not trust the boy with the money, that boy would know that the pastor did not have faith in him. And what that boy needed most in that moment was for someone to believe in him. "If we are to be made free by faith in Jesus Christ," Macleod wrote, "it means acting now as if this world was Jesus' world. It [is] a costly business, living by faith and not by sight... costly in cash, costly in reputation. It means often being done down in life in order to rise in life."³

Taking hopeful risks in the name of faith that might put us in harm's way – that is the bodily part of a living sacrifice. Think of Mother Theresa in Calcutta... think of the people of faith who led the non-violent resistance of the Civil Rights Movement... think of theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer returning to Nazi Germany in 1939, knowing full well would almost certainly happen to him. To offer ourselves in faith as a living sacrifice to God is not just a commitment of the mind, but of our bodies as well. "Act as if Jesus ruled now," Macleod said. "And as you pray for God to pour down His mercy on you, you had better take a pretty stout umbrella... because, if you really act in faith, a lot of people will throw things at you."

But that was not the only reason Macleod recommended an umbrella, and his reasoning relates to the third aspect of sacrificial living. If we can transform and renew our minds, if we also commit our putting our bodies on the line in faith, then something amazing happens to our spirits. In Macleod's words, "you will feel such a spring shower of forgiveness coming down on you that it will soak you!"⁴ This exact promise is made by the prophets of old. As Malachi prophesied, "[P]ut me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."⁵

This washing of our spirit with a torrential blessing from above is the reward enjoyed by those who truly commit... those who follow not just in thought but also in bold, embodied, faithful deeds. And this cleansing opens our eyes as well. At long last, we will have a clear vision of what life is truly about. At long last, we will understand God's will for our life. At long last, we will see not as the world sees, but as God sees.

This commitment of our lives – body, mind, and spirit -- is what I think Paul envisioned when he sent these words to Rome: "*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. 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.*" **Amen.**

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at 101.

⁵ Malachi 3:10.