

How To Offer A Living Sacrifice

I am sure all of us have experienced the situation in which we wanted to do something, but did not know how to do it, whether it was baking a cake, or tuning your car, or getting something done on the computer. You want to do it but you are frustrated because you really do not understand some things, or you just simply do not know how.

Last fall I bought an iPhone. We had bought Letha one a month or two earlier, but because of everything you can do with these so-called “smart phones,” I decided I would bite the bullet and get one for myself. Now understand, I’m the guy who believes Alexander Graham Bell was up to no good when he invented the first telephone! I’m not a big fan of phones although I will admit they can come in handy. But, I had never owned a cell-phone, certainly not a smart phone. Letha had a cell phone for years, and I had used hers a number of times, but they pretty much did the basic things, they allowed you to make or receive phone calls, and maybe store a few phone numbers.

But the smart phones were a completely different animal, and the more I began to realize could be done with one, the more I began to be interested in them. So finally last fall I got one, and I have to tell you, I absolutely love it! I use it all the time, and I can’t imagine how anyone gets anything done without one. But because I decided to get one, I really wanted to learn how to get the most out of it. And it wasn’t long until one of my children talked me into getting on Facebook. I agreed to becoming a Facebook user so I could hopefully keep up with my kids and grandkids a little better. I had noticed that they didn’t do a whole lot of email anymore. Letters, per-se had disappeared years ago, and so I thought I was a pretty hip grandpa for knowing how to send and receive emails, but then that kind of slowed down. They had all gotten on Facebook. So I figured I was going to have to get on Facebook as well if I wanted to keep up with them.

Well, both of those things require a lot of learning—both the iPhone and Facebook, so guess what I received for Christmas this past year? [hold up iPhone for Dummies and Facebook for Dummies] Of course, I immediately discovered these were “way too technical!” Even so, at least I had something that I could go to that has helped me learn, at least a little bit.

In the same kind of way, I think sometimes being a Christian takes some extra learning. Well, we know that is the case, and in fact, Jesus anticipated that, when, in giving the Great commission, he said—**Matthew 28:18-20**,

“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19) Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20) teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I know that we are not surprised by this. We know that there is a lot about the Christian life that we do not know very well; that we do not practice very well, that we do not understand very well. And I think a very good example of that was found in our reading this week.

I want you to open your Bible to one of the greatest chapters in all the Bible--**Romans, chapter 12**. I know this is one of the favorite chapters of a great many people. It is one of those chapters that you cannot read without being inspired, without getting excited.

But I want to draw your attention especially to **verse 1**, where Paul, the apostle, writes: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."*

We have read that many times, and yet I dare say, there is still a little uncertainty just what God is asking of us in that verse. What does it mean to *"present your bodies as a living sacrifice?"* How does one do that? Under the Law of Moses, sacrifices of lambs and bulls and birds were offered. These would be slain, then the blood poured out on the altar, and either the whole or parts of the animal would be burned up with fire.

So it is obvious that God has something else in mind for us. He wants a "living sacrifice." So how do we do that? That's the question I want to try to answer to this morning, and Paul does answer it for us in the 12th chapter, or at least He gives us the beginning of the answer. He goes on in chapters 13 and 14 to describe some other things, but I believe if we will give serious consideration to the things found in this chapter, we will have a really good idea of just how one goes about presenting their *"bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."*

First up, **verse 2**, Paul says, we must *not be conformed to this world*. I have always like the way the J.B. Philip's translation renders that. It says, *"do not let the world press you into its mold."* Christians are to be different, not just for the sake of being different, or to be odd, but because living a holy life will almost always cause you to think, and feel, and talk and live differently than the people around you.

Of course, that is not something that comes easily or automatically. But, if you are doing things right, what Paul calls a transformation will begin to take place. You will begin to look and sound and act differently. This transformation comes because of what Paul calls, a *"renewal of your mind."* That is, through an ongoing refreshing of your mind you will continue to think differently than the way the world around you thinks. That allows you to, as it were, "test" what is going on around you and enable you to know what the will of God is. That way you will continue to think and feel and say and do those things that are good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul admonishes us not to think more highly of ourselves than is warranted. We are to think soberly about ourselves with a discernment of the particular gifts or talents with which God has blessed us. This will help us fulfill that place or role within the body. As Paul reminds us of this body concept it teaches us that this matter of offering a living sacrifice to God is done in the

context of our being a part of the body, which is the church. We Americans tend to think of things in terms of how it relates or affects us as individuals, but for Paul, our Christian lives are to be lived in union with other believers. So whatever gift or talent we have been given, we must use it correctly and for the sake of the body.

And then, beginning in verse 9 and continuing all the way to the end of the chapter, in verse 21, Paul describes a number of ways we are actually able to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Depending on how you count them, or put them together, there are from 21 to 30 different ways we can do that. They are not things we would do all of the time, but as time and circumstance demand, here is what a living sacrifice looks like:

First, such Christians will practice a genuine love. That is, they won't pretend to love someone and then behind their back, gossip about them and do things that hurt them.

They will hate what is evil and they will hold fast to what is good. The Psalmist said, "*Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.*" (119:104). And in writing to the Thessalonians, Paul told them, "*...test everything and hold fast to what is good.*" And keep in mind, just because a lot of people in the world think something is good does not mean that it is. Be wise, and let God's Word and His holiness help you discern what really is good or evil.

Next Paul says (10), "love one another with brotherly love." That is, don't be afraid to be affectionate. Some people act like they might break if someone wants to give them a hug. Greeting one another with a holy kiss was a common feature of apostolic Christianity.

Then Paul says, (also in 10) "Outdo one another in showing honor." Look for ways to compliment someone, to put them in a good light, to hold them up and draw attention to their good spirit and good works. This is the kind of thing that people do who are trying to offer God a living sacrifice.

Verse 11, Paul says, and I'm putting several things together here, I think they are connected: "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." Being zealous is one thing that Paul could say for the Jews, they had a zeal for God. How zealous are we for God? How zealous are we to know, to grow and to go? Sometimes the zeal of those who do not know the truth puts to shame those who do. Paul is talking about our service to God. Are we fervent, zealous? Think about that because that is how we offer to God a living sacrifice.

For the sake of brevity I put the next three admonitions together also. Paul says, verse 12, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." That's how we do it; how we offer to God a living sacrifice. It is done with a smile on our face and a song in our heart. Why, because of the hope that we have been given in Christ. And because of that hope, we can even be, and we should be, "patient in tribulation." Listen, troubles come, don't they? Our troubles today probably have more to do with the common trials of life, more so than

because of any kind of persecution or pressure due to our efforts to live the Christian life and spread the Christian gospel. But when troubles and trials come, is that a sign God has abandoned us? No, not at all. In fact, the Hebrew writer will argue in chapter 12 that it may be a sign of God's love. Furthermore, the Christian intent on offering God a living sacrifice will stay in constant touch with Him in prayer. Paul told the Thessalonians, "*Pray without ceasing.*" That doesn't mean we spend all day and all night in prayer, but that prayer becomes something we do almost without having to think about it. It becomes a natural part of who we are and how we live our life each day.

A person who desires to offer a living sacrifice to God will also look for opportunities to bless and minister to others. Paul writes, **verse 13**, "*Contribute to the needs of the saints.*" This is parallel to Galatians 6:2, which says, "*Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.*" One of the most enjoyable things you get to do as a Christian is to be of assistance to someone who is in need. Indeed, as the Lord said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Sometimes what is needed is fellowship and friendship. That is why Paul goes on to say there in verse 13, "*seek to show hospitality.*" We often think of hospitality as having someone over for a meal or desserts, but it is really more than that. Hospitality is the art of making people feel welcome and appreciated.

Sometimes however, the people who come into our lives do not come as friends. They may be friends, and they may even be Christian brothers or sisters, but they have a desire to hurt us. For various reasons, they have turned against us, and they may talk about us, or as was the case for many in the first century, try to actually harm you. How does a Christian deal with those people and those situations? What does a living sacrifice look like in times like that. **Well Paul tells, verse 14, he says: "*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*"** He will almost repeat himself a little later in this same chapter, when he tells us that vengeance is God's business, not ours. I realize that is not normal, and it is certainly not easy, but that's what a living sacrifice looks like.

Such people will also "Rejoice with *those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*" Paul says. Do you hear what he is saying? He is say, "be happy," especially when you are around those who for various reasons have a reason to rejoice. Living sacrifices are not people who "rain on other people's parades!"

Verse 16, Paul says, "*Live in harmony with one another.*" KJV renders that, "*Be of the same mind toward one another.*" In other words do what you can to get along. Probably the practice of the golden rule here is all that we would need to know and do.

Verse 17 says, "*Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly, never be wise in your own sight.*" We had the greatest example of that in Christ didn't we? The King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the God of Creation, he left the throne room of heaven to come and associate with us. The Hebrew writer says he was made a little lower than angels, and he came to the poorest of the poor, and to the worst of sinners. Paul says, "*never be wise in your own eyes.*"

That's the second time Paul has stressed this. Back in verse 3, Paul told not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. We need to get past this idea that we are some kind of authority on anything. That might serve you well on your job, but at home and in the church, it really is kind of annoying. Besides that, if you were really wise, you wouldn't have let Satan catch you off guard like he does.

The rest of chapter 12, from verse 17 through the end of the chapter, Paul basically is re-emphasizing what he said in **verse 14** about dealing with people who treat you mean, or take advantage of you, or try to hurt you in some way. He says, "*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18) If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* All pretty much includes everyone, whether they are in the church or not. Forget about trying to get even; forget about paybacks. Those who want to offer to their God a living sacrifice will be those who refrain from every trying to avenge themselves. They leave such things to God, knowing that He will do a much better job of settling scores than they ever could. In fact, Paul says—**verse 20**, "*if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.*" 21) *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*"

So, that's it. I'm not saying that's all there is to it, but there you have a pretty good summary of how to actually do what Christians are commanded to do in verse 1; which is to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. It isn't anything mysterious, and in fact, it is rather practical. And it is not anything that any of us cannot do.

Paul said, "do it", and when you do, that is your spiritual worship, or your spiritual, reasonable service. He isn't saying that this takes the place of assembling with the saints each Lord's day. He is saying that in contrast with the old sacrificial system, where everything was laid out in a prescribed ritual and physical, the Christian's offering is spiritual in nature. I think the Message version puts it in a way that we will remember. It says, "*So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life--and place it before God as an offering.*"

This isn't something we do once a year, or even once a week, it is something we can do every day of the week and every day for the rest of our lives! And of course the way to get started is to make sure first of all that we are Christians and that we walking humbly with the Lord. If that isn't true, then right now would be a good time to make that happen.