

The Sacrificial Life

In my last article we looked briefly at the life and ministry of the great Protestant Reformer, John Calvin. Calvin taught—and was an example of the biblical truth—that Christians' lives are never to be lived merely for ourselves. In this article, I want to begin an examination of this truth from Paul's letter to the Romans. Listen to these words from the venerable Apostle:

"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." (Romans 12:1) Prior to this verse, Paul has spent a great portion of the previous 11 chapters explaining to us, our sinfulness, our need for a Savior, and the provision that God has made for us "in Christ." Christians have been "justified," i.e., declared righteous because of Jesus' perfect life of righteousness credited to us and our sins pardoned because of his sacrificial death on the cross. (Romans 3:21ff) Paul concludes chapter 11 with this wonderful doxology: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen"

By beginning chapter 12 with the word translated, "Therefore," Paul is saying in effect, "Given everything that I've been laboring to teach you in the previous 11 chapters, I urge you, toward an important, comprehensive life direction." Paul uses a Greek present tense verb which signals to us that this "urging" is ongoing—a needed encouragement throughout our lives. In classical Greek, the verb that's given here was used to exhort troops who were going into battle to give everything they have to give to fight against the enemy.

Next, Paul presents the motivation for our important—although still unknown to us in this verse—life direction. Paul's "urging" is grounded in, "the mercies of God." He's reminding us that God has shown us mercy in a myriad of ways but certainly, and primarily, the mercy that's been shown to God's people through the self-less sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf. So then, "by the mercies of God," (which is your proper motivation), you're to (here it is), "present your bodies as a living sacrifice....." Those who've spent time in the study of scripture will be alerted immediately to Paul's allusion to the Old Testament sacrificial system.

In Leviticus 22, beginning in verse 19, we're told that the sacrifices that were acceptable to God had to be "without blemish." The animals with imperfections were rejected (Lev. 22:22). This is an important reminder to us: our imperfect works of righteousness are accepted only because of Jesus Christ—the "Lamb of God" who, by his perfect sacrifice, makes his people acceptable to God. It's also true that, in the Old Testament, sacrifices had to be dead before they could be offered to God. And yet, Paul is calling on us to "present our bodies" as a "living sacrifice." Given the fact that Paul is clearly alluding to the Old Testament sacrificial system, what can we glean that will help us understand our verse in Romans? First of all, the Old Testament

priests were the ones who offered the sacrifices (Hebrews 5:1). Paul is teaching us that we are priests who “offer” our sacrifice (1 Peter 2:9); another amazing reality is this: we ourselves are the “living sacrifices” as opposed to dead!

Still, it is true that, in one sense, Christians have died. “We have died to sin (in order that) we might live to righteousness.” (1 Peter 2:24) And, of course, that’s exactly what Paul is driving at in this verse. There’s one other aspect that we need to add to this sacrificial language. Along with being the priest who “offers” the sacrifice as well as our being the “living sacrifice,” our bodies are the Temple where the sacrifices were offered! In 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?”

Going back to our text, Paul says that our sacrifices are to be “holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.” Although it’s true that we’re positionally holy because of Christ’s righteousness credited to us in our justification, that can’t be Paul’s meaning here in Romans 12. Paul is teaching us that, in light of the “mercies of God” we’re called to grow, by grace, in sanctification (practical holiness) which is inclusive of giving our lives wholly and sacrificially to God, and to our neighbor—as we have opportunity and following the guidance given in Scripture. This is our “spiritual worship” given daily to our holy God.

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