

Living Sacrifices

Grace and holiness . . . the relationship between God's mercy and His demand for righteous living . . . that's the subject of this summer series. Pretty heavy stuff for the holiday season, but it does help you keep your brain in gear through the hot days when you face the daunting task of staying awake through a 30-minute sermon with little or no fresh air in the room.

Anyway, it's an important topic. It's important for us because our spiritual lives are sometimes like the motion of a carnival ride, up and down, twisting and turning. We're not sure which way is up and we can end up feeling sick to our stomach. If we don't know the truth of the gospel and the relationship of grace to holiness, we can easily become confused and discouraged. So, today, we'll carry the topic into Romans 12 and Ephesians 5. Let's start with Romans:

And so, dear Christian friends, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice -- the kind He will accept. When you think of what He has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect His will really is.

In the New International Version it reads, "in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." In view of mercy, offer yourselves as a holy sacrifice. In light of grace, in response to love, the appropriate comeback is a life that is set apart to bring glory to the Lord. If the gift was small, a token present to celebrate a special occasion that the giver could easily afford, then the response would be appropriately small -- a thank you card or a phone call. But because the gift is SO enormous, so huge, the sacrifice of God's perfect Son, then the response has to also be huge.

But what do we have to give? What's an appropriate response when the Creator gives His life for His creation? There's nothing that is adequate, no way of getting even and getting rid of this feeling of massive obligation.

*What can I give to you
What can I offer to the King
For all the love You've shown
For all Your mercy over me
I called Your name, You heard my cry
Out of the grave and into life
My heart is Yours, my soul is free
Thank you God, for saving me*

The interesting thing to me is that the songwriter doesn't answer his own question. It is truly a rhetorical question that doesn't have an answer. "What can I give You? What can I offer to the King?" doesn't need an answer because we all know that we have nothing in our bag of tricks, our bank accounts or our skill set that is adequate

payment for the gift of grace that God extends to us.

The phrase which is often translated “your spiritual act or service of worship”, can also be translated “your rational or reasonable act of worship”. What’s a reasonable or rational way in which to respond to God’s great mercy towards us? To offer our bodies as living and holy sacrifices to Him, to His service, to His glory.

I’ve given some thought to this combination of words that Paul uses here: living and holy. I find it curious that Paul would put those two words together. After all, it seems that anything that is living is probably pretty unholy. It is the collection of people who are alive who are doing all the damage in the world. How can I be both a living and a holy sacrifice, one that pleases my God? I think the point is that God wants us to offer our best to Him, to give our lives to Him while we’re still living, while we still have passion and energy for the work of His Kingdom.

In the second verse in this chapter, Paul seems to echo what Peter said in the passage we looked at last week. Let’s review 1 Peter 1:14, then look at Romans 12:2:

As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

In both passages believers are being urged to resist the pressure to conform to the expectations of the world around them. And if we compare the old life of ignorance in 1 Peter with the new life of a renewed mind in Romans, we see that both call for a new way of thinking, a way that sets us apart from the world around us. This new way of thinking is available to us by revelation from the Spirit of God who enables us to see the truth about ourselves in the Word of God. Word and Spirit are the two vital elements for a real Christian experience. The Word guides us, illuminating the truth only God knows, and the Spirit empowers us to live up to the light we have been given. Wisdom and power at work together in the lives of those who truly trust the Lord.

So, that’s simple enough, made clear by repetition, “Don’t think like the world does. If you do, you won’t find life. Let your mind be transformed and renewed by the Spirit of God. Let His word speak into your life, convince you of His truth, reveal to you the things the world can’t see because it has no room for the reality, no grid that allows for a Creator.” And as you do that, the Spirit shows you the emptiness of this world’s philosophies, the reason that they fail to explain the mysteries of the universe and the reason they fail us morally and ethically.

The rest of the chapter, and Ephesians 5, are explanations of how to live in this new way. Again, it starts with grace, as Paul writes, “*By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.*” That’s a great place to start - with a humble recognition of who you are, not puffing yourself up, nor beating yourself up, but, and here we pick up Paul’s writing again:

but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

In other words, you might think that your value should be measured in the things you are best at, by your sharp mind or your boldness or your compassion -- but here we are told that our value in the Kingdom is according to our faith. . . and that the faith that gives us value is a gift. We can neither boast about it nor increase it in our own strength . . . but we can ask God to increase it within us.

Sober self-assessment isn't as easy as you might think. Within every sector of our society, individuals think they are smarter than they are, more knowledgeable than they are, more entitled than they are and worthy of more respect and attention than they are currently receiving. A pastor friend of mine told me this week that a man had left his congregation a few months ago because this pastor had failed to visit his wife when she was in the hospital. He hadn't bothered to inform the pastor that she was in the hospital and no one else told him either -- but the facts don't matter in a case like that. The only thing that matters is that this person felt slighted and so he concluded that the pastor didn't care and he wasn't going to attend a church and listen to an uncaring man preach. Now that might seem like a stretch from the point I'm making about sober self-assessment, but it's really not. This person made assumptions, arrived at conclusions and made decisions based on nothing but his own opinion and that opinion was based on false information. When we are more humble about our opinions and more diligent about finding out the truth, we won't be as likely to make rash decisions and spout off nonsense that, in the end, does nothing but make us look bad.

Enough on that - Paul goes on from there to describe how each of us is uniquely gifted, uniquely equipped by the Spirit of God for service in His Kingdom. Then he urges believers to be actively using the gifts we've been given.

Then, v. 9:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

And then, in v. 21:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Sometimes we think of holiness as being defined by what we won't do, where we won't go. But here is a description of holiness, of what happens when your mind is renewed and your life transformed. Sincere love, devotion to one another, a willingness to honor one another, a fervent zeal for God's Kingdom, joy, patience,

faithfulness in prayer, sharing, hospitality -- these are the hallmarks of the person whose life has been changed by the power of the Spirit.

Notice how many times pride is addressed in one form or another. "Honor one another above yourselves." "Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." That's pretty direct and it comes after Paul has written, "I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment."

It's no surprise, but it is very significant, that the breakdowns we see in human relationships are almost always the result of pride in some form. Dad and mum start fighting about how something should be done around the home, the fight escalates to one of those, "You always!" statements and from there it gets hurtful. Eventually, one partner decides that he or she shouldn't have to put up with this anymore and they are out the door, leaving behind their own responsibility for the brokenness in the relationship and, often, hurting children as well as the partner whom they've wounded. It's in that moment of pride, "I shouldn't have to put up with this", that some of the greatest damage is done and here we see Paul addressing this root.

This whole passage calls for depth and integrity in our relationships. Each of these verses calls us out of selfishness and pride and into an attitude of love, of sharing your possessions, of opening your home, of serving with enthusiasm, of refusing to get caught up in the blaming cycle, or the revenge cycle. He summarizes it all by saying, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Don't be a victim. Don't let the pride and self-centredness that this world thrives on, conform you to its way of thinking and thereby destroy your life.

What are the options? Do not repay anyone evil for evil. You don't need to get even. You don't need to make everyone know how much you've been hurt. You don't need to let your pain define who you are as a person. You can let it go, you can bless your enemies, you can pray for those who slander your name - you're bigger than that.

If you give even a quick look at this list of instructions, the first in the whole book of Romans, by the way, you see that this call to a transformed life through a transformed mind is primarily relational. It's in the area of relationships that the Kingdom of God advances or is sabotaged. If we love sincerely, hating what is evil and clinging to what is good and if we're devoted to one another and honor one another above ourselves, there will be a quality in our relationships that is both unique and really wonderful. Doing these things demonstrates that you have made a living and holy sacrifice of your life, the kind that pleases God. And living this way enhances, builds up, encourages the growth of the Kingdom of God.

This is a description of a holy life. The theme of holiness is introduced in the first verse of the chapter and the teaching that follows is built on that first command. Holiness is not defined in Romans 12 as a list of things to avoid, but as an attitude of heart that produces unity in the body and extends grace to those outside the body of

Christ.

The list that you might have expected is found in Ephesians 5, but notice how this one starts:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Last week we read from Peter's first letter, that God asks us to be holy just as He is holy. And here we see the same kind of instruction: "Be imitators of God". Again, the first qualification of that command has to do with love: "live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us." This has to be at the heart of all we do as Christians, and though we've heard it a thousand times or more, we need to be reminded of it again and again: If we're going to follow Jesus we must have as our goal that we would love like Him.

We continue on with Ephesians 5:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person -- such a person is an idolater -- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

We skip down to verse 8:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

And on it goes from there, with Paul urging the Ephesian believers to live in wisdom and in understanding the will of God. What does all this mean to us? What does it actually mean to live holy lives and how do we know when or if we're doing it? Scripture is pretty clear on what constitutes the darkness and what constitutes the light. It is clear in stating that sexual immorality, drunkenness and greed are fruitless -- they don't produce anything of value. If I were to ask you to list the positive results, the societal benefits, of drunkenness or promiscuous sex, I think you'd come up with a pretty short list -- or at least an unconvincing one.

Listen to what Paul is saying here: the life of selfish indulgence does nothing to bring glory to God and is, therefore, both a waste and a sin. This is life in the dark, life lived in ignorance, and life consumed with fruitless deeds. If you're an imitator of God, which Ephesians 5 starts out with, you avoid darkness and walk in the light. In the world, where God is not acknowledged and therefore His purposes are not given any weight, the word "fruitless" has no meaning. People think a good life is simply a happy life. If I'm happy, and the people around me are happy, then it's all good. What's there to be fruitful about, except for those who want children? But God's

agenda is about living a life with purpose, and that purpose has to do with fruitfulness. Listen to these words from Jesus, spoken to His disciples on the night before His crucifixion:

I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last. (John 15:16)

That comes after He has already said:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in Me and I in Him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing. (v. 5)

Living according to the revelation of Scripture, which means living a life of loving and serving others, which we saw in Romans 12, and staying clear of the fruitless deeds of darkness which we see in Ephesians 5, is key to producing the right kind of fruit in our lives. It is also key that we foster and cherish our relationship with Jesus. He is the vine, we are the branches and that means He is the source of our life. Without Him, we can't accomplish what God wants for us to accomplish.

This is counter to the culture of happiness, of personal ambition and fulfilment that we see all around us, but it is the clear call of Scripture. A holy life, a life set apart for the glory of God, is a life on purpose. Our purpose is to bear a whole lot of fruit and we do that through walking close to Jesus. The two things we've seen today that we've seen many times before are that we walk in love and patience with one another and that we steer clear of the world's self-indulgence and spiritual darkness. That's in the past. It represents the life we once lived, but not the life we've now been called to. So, let's live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness & truth.