

Romans 12:1-8 “Living Sacrifices”

When you think about people who are the “best of the best” in this world, the word “sacrifice” is always part of the equation. It doesn’t matter if you’re a world-class musician, scientist, Olympic athlete, or doctor. If you want to be among the best of the best, there are going to be sacrifices. Here are the obvious ones: time and resources, financial security, sleep, and free time. But there are some lesser-known sacrifices, too: Privacy. Loss of identity. Isolation. Instant gratification. What someone is willing to sacrifice is often the difference between being talented and being exceptional. And sacrifice is one of those virtues we teach our kids from an early age. “If you want to be good at something, it’s going to take hard work. And it’s going to take sacrifice.” If you want to make the team, you have to practice. If you want to be a musician, you’re going to spend hours playing scales instead of playing video games. If you want to be a doctor, you’re going to give up years of your life to medical school and residency.

We understand sacrifice as part of mastering something. But when we start talking about religion, sacrifice suddenly seems to mean something very different. If you’ve been coming to Bible study or Sunday worship over the last several weeks, we’ve been digging into the Apostle Paul’s understanding of sacrifice. And the more you study the Bible, the more you realize that sacrifice is a much different idea than we sometimes make it. Some religious traditions give food offerings. Some present animal sacrifices. Some involve blood. Some don’t. And they don’t all mean the same thing. Some sacrifices have to do with forgiveness or purification. Others are expressions of gratitude. Some are connected to vows or dedication. And some are essentially meals—a way of creating space at the table where God and people can encounter one another.

So sacrifice in the Bible isn’t just *one thing*. But we humans have a tendency to take something that was supposed to mean one thing, and then we mess with it until we either over-simplify it, or we over-complicate it. See in this case, we gather all these different kinds of sacrifices together and turn them into one basic idea -- **Sacrifice is all about giving something up to appease an angry God.** And let’s be honest, the slaughtering and burning of an animal as an offering for sin is certainly the biggest and most dramatic example of sacrifice in the Bible. It’s kind of gross. Kind of shocking. It’s sort of spooky and melodramatic. So naturally, we fixate on it. And when we do, we can end up thinking that sacrifice is all about punishment. Someone has to suffer. Something has to die. God is angry, and sacrifices make God happy again. Except the Bible itself keeps pushing back on that grossly simplistic understanding.

The prophets of the eighth century keep reminding Israel that God isn’t impressed by religious activity when that religious activity *becomes a substitute for actually loving people*. Micah asks what God really wants. Is it thousands of rams? Rivers of oil? Even giving up your firstborn? And the answer is actually pretty simple. No. God wants us to do justice love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Then Hosea comes along and delivers a similar message from God: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” And then, centuries later, Jesus *quotes* Hosea. In our first scripture from Matthew we see that some Pharisees are criticizing Jesus because he’s “eating with tax collectors and sinners.” And Jesus says: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Now, here we are in Romans where our buddy Paul has spent a *lot* of time talking about sacrifice. And then, in Romans 12, he says: “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.” Wait a minute. The prophets say, “God desires mercy, *not* sacrifice.” *Jesus* says, “God desire mercy, *not* sacrifice.” Then Paul says, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” My word. Paul likes stirring the pot, doesn’t he? But I don’t think Paul is actually arguing with the prophets or Jesus. I think they’re all trying to lead us to understand what sacrifice is actually for. Because Jesus isn’t saying sacrifice is inherently bad. Remember what’s happening in Matthew 9. Jesus is being criticized because he’s eating with tax collectors and sinners. And his response is basically: “If you’re going to talk about religious devotion while avoiding people who need mercy, you’ve missed the point.”

The problem *isn’t* sacrifice. The problem is **sacrifice becoming a substitute for mercy**. Or, to put it another way: **Don’t think sacrifice makes up for the absence of love**. And I think that helps us understand what Paul is doing here in Romans 12. Paul turns the whole idea of sacrifice inside out. He says: “Present your bodies as living sacrifices.” Notice what Paul *doesn’t* say. He doesn’t say, “Kill something for God.” He says: **“Give yourself to God.”** And notice where this comes in play in this letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul has spent eleven chapters talking about what God has done. God’s grace. God’s mercy. God’s faithfulness. God’s work through Christ. God’s welcoming both Jews and Gentiles to the table. And then Paul says: **“Therefore...”**

In light of everything God has already done, what does it look like to give your life back to God? That’s a very different understanding of sacrifice. Sacrifice isn’t a payment. **Sacrifice is a response**. Sacrifice isn’t punishment. **Sacrifice is dedication**. Sacrifice isn’t, “I have to hurt something to make God happy.” It’s: **“My life belongs to God, so I’m going to live accordingly.”** And that’s when that next phrase starts to make sense: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed by the renewing of your minds*.” Because now Paul is asking a different question. How does the *world* understand sacrifice?

Again, the world wants to think of sacrifice as giving something up. And you know, sometimes it is. But think about all the ways our world – *our culture* asks us to sacrifice ourselves: Sacrifice for your career. Sacrifice for success. Sacrifice yourself for your family. Sacrifice yourself for your country. Sacrifice yourself for your political tribe. Or... Uh oh. Here it comes. Sacrifice yourself for your church. Sacrifice yourself so everyone thinks you’re a good person. You might be thinking, “Yeah, but Jesse, didn’t you just begin this sermon by telling us that sacrifice is necessary if you want to be really good at something?” Hmmmm. Did I? Maybe I did. But here’s the difference. The question isn’t simply: **“What are you willing to sacrifice?”** Maybe the better question is: **“What are you offering yourself to?”** Because we’ve all got to give ourselves to something. That’s unavoidable. The claim of the Christian isn’t, “We sacrifice and everyone else doesn’t.” The Christian claim is that **we don’t have to let the world decide what our lives are for**.

That’s what Paul means when he says: “Do not be conformed to this world.” Don’t let the world tell you what makes you valuable. Don’t let the world tell you what makes a life successful.

Don't let the world tell you what deserves your time, your attention, your energy, your money, or your loyalty. Let God *transform* the way you think about your life.

And then Paul gets even more practical. He says: "Present your bodies as living sacrifices." Your *bodies*. Not just your thoughts. Not just your beliefs. Not just your good intentions. Your *bodies*. Your actual lives. Your hands. Your time. Your talents. Your resources. Your relationships. Your abilities. Your work. Your attention. Your compassion. And then Paul immediately starts talking about how those bodies exist in relationship to *other* bodies. "For as in one body we have many members."

That's a beautiful thing. The living sacrifice isn't some abstract spiritual thing happening inside your head. It's your actual life, lived in relationship with other people. And Paul says we each have different gifts. Some teach. Some encourage. Some give. Some lead. Some show mercy. Paul isn't ranking them. He's not saying one is more important than another. He's saying: **This is what it looks like when you give yourself to God.** You use what you've been given for the good of other people. And suddenly, there's a progression here. **God gives God's self to us. We give ourselves to God. And giving ourselves to God means giving ourselves for others.** Okay. Now we're sounding a whole lot more like Jesus. Because Jesus said: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Jesus isn't saying, "God doesn't want you to give yourself to God." He's saying: **"Don't use religion to avoid becoming the kind of person God is calling you to be."** And Paul says, **"So give God your life—and then let that life become something different."** That's where "do not be conformed to the world" comes in. Maybe the world teaches us that worship is about what we give up for God. But Paul says worship is about **what kind of people we become because of what God has done for us.** What sort of people do we become? People who don't have to be the most important person in the room. People who recognize that they need other people. People who use what they've been given for the benefit of other people. People who serve. People who teach. People who encourage. People who give. People who lead. People who paint! People who show mercy. And suddenly, "living sacrifice" and "mercy" aren't opposites at all. **Mercy is what a living sacrifice looks like.**

So maybe the question isn't, "What are you willing to sacrifice?" Maybe the question is: **"What are you offering yourself to?"** And listen, the world is far too happy to answer that question for you. But Paul says: **Don't let it.** Give yourself to God. And then let God use your life for the good of others.