

ROMANS 12:1-2
LITURGICAL SACRIFICE AS A PATTERN FOR LIFE (PART 1)

Daniel Boone was the great American explorer who first scouted out men of the Western Frontier. He was a pioneer and a trailblazer, cutting a path through the wilderness and laying the foundations for the expansion of civilization.

Boone one time said of his journeys, "I have never been lost, but I will admit to being confused for several weeks."

You ladies may say, "typical man!" – he'd never admit to being lost. Of course, there were no gas stations to stop and ask directions at in those days anyway.

But what Boone says is relevant to the church in our day. We may not be altogether lost, but we are confused.

And so the question is, "How do we find our way?" Where can we stop and ask directions? We're situated on a cultural frontier, living in the first explicitly secular civilization in all of human history. We are in a wilderness period – the church no longer occupies a central role in society and faithful Christians are often excluded from positions of cultural influence. The church herself, despite usually being sincere, is confused and misled and stuck in immaturity. And so in a situation like this, it's worth asking: Has God given us a map? Has God given us a pattern, not only for shaping our own lives, but the world around us? Is there a "master plan" that takes in all of life and society and reshapes them in God's way? The answer is yes, we do have such a plan and pattern, and it's very simple. That pattern is SACRIFICE.

One word, 3 syllables, 9 letters. It's what everything comes down to. SACRIFICE. Through the gospel, God calls us into a *sacrificial* form of life.

Now I've been talking about this some in Sunday School lately and I'll repeat myself here somewhat, but I think that's okay because this is so important.

Sacrifice is at the center of the Christian life. Everything we do is to have a sacrificial texture. Sacrifice is to be the overriding metaphor for all that we do in our personal walk with Christ. But sacrifice is also the cornerstone of a Christian culture, a Christian city, a Christian civilization.

Look at Romans 12:1-2. Paul has just spent 11 chapters laying out the manifold grace of God. He has put on display God's covenant faithfulness, his saving righteousness, in Christ Jesus. Through Jesus and through the Spirit, God's people have been liberated from sin and death and put on the path to a glorious resurrection in the future. Paul has spoken of the forgiveness of sins, of acceptance with God, of victory over the power of sin, of God's worldwide redemptive plan. He has told us – in 11 chapters of glorious detail – what God has done for us and the cosmos in Christ.

And so when he gets ready to move from what God has done for us to what we do for God in response, there's only one word he can reach for that captures everything he

wants to say – and it's the word SACRIFICE. This is the essence of a right response to the gospel. He says “in view of the mercies/compassions of God” – that is to say in view of the fact that God sacrificed his Son for you – “what is your reasonable, or logical, act of service in return?” SACRIFICE!! Christian ethics, the Christian walk, the Christian way of life, all boils down to sacrifice. To master sacrifice is to master everything.

Why is mercies/compassions in the plural? Because the singular cannot contain what God has done. He has given us both his Son and his Spirit (cf. 8:1-4). His mercy is multi-faceted, multi-colored. The gospel bestows the fullness of God's graces and mercies upon us. It is grace on top of grace, it is mercy upon mercy. And its all through the sacrifice of Christ, as he has shown, that these many varieties of mercy come to us.

God's sacrificial gift requires a sacrificial return. Sacrifice should be met with sacrifice. We answer God's sacrificial love in Christ, with sacrificial love in Christ. Nothing else is fitting. Christ's sacrificial death calls forth a sacrificial form of life on our part.

Paul says that living sacrificially is our “reasonable” act of worship/service (verse 2). But “reasonable” is really “logical” – it's from the root “logos,” which makes us think of the “word” (it's sacrifice based on the Bible, shaped by the Scriptures), but especially Jesus, whom John called the “Logos” made flesh for us. This is our “in Christ” service – it's reasonable/logical because we are in him and it is service offered through him, in union with him, on the foundation of his work. That colors and flavors and textures everything Paul says here. That's why Paul says our sacrifices – imperfect as they are – can be “holy” and “acceptable to God.” In union with Christ, whatever is lacking in our sacrificial response to the gospel is made whole and worthy of God's favor. Not only our persons but our works – the sacrifices that flow out of us – are embraced by God.

Now let's look at what Paul means by “sacrifice” in more detail. Paul writes, “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God.”

Several things should be noted here:

First, either Paul has bad grammar or he's making a really profound theological point. He says “offer your bodies” – plural – “as a living sacrifice” – singular. The many bodies become one sacrifice. The many brothers offer one sacrifice. The many sacrifices of the OT have condensed into one sacrifice in Christ.

We offer ourselves individually, but our sacrifices are all joined together into one sacrifice – it's really the corporate sacrifice Paul has in view. Sacrificial living in community and as a community. All together, we are a LIVING SACRIFICE. The many are made into one. Paul bends the grammar to show the church's unity in response to the gospel.

Second, when he says “offer your bodies” we shouldn't think he's saying offer *only* your body and not the rest of your personality or soul. The Bible always envisions the human person as a unity of body and soul. So Peter says eight *souls* were saved on the ark – but obviously their bodies were saved as well. Biblically you could say a person is a soul in bodily form. “Soul” or “body” can each stand for the whole person, from inner or outer

perspectives. To offer your body is to offer your whole person. Total sacrifice is called for. We're called to sacrifice ourselves completely, in harmony with one another.

Third, Paul calls us to offer ourselves as *living* sacrifices. Now, this is odd, because when we think of sacrifice we think of death. And that's true. This is a paradox, just like when Jesus said, "he who loses his life will find it," or "for a seed to bear fruit it must first die." But we need to be careful – we can't just take the metaphor of sacrifice and pour into it our own content. This is where we need to focus our attention.

Paul has in the background here the *sacrificial worship* of the temple in Jerusalem (and before that the tabernacle). Those animal sacrifices find their fulfillment in Christ and now in CHRIST'S PEOPLE, who have been united to him by faith and made sharers in Christ's own life of self-sacrifice. But the sacrifices included not only death, but also RESURRECTION. We need to allow the Bible to redefine and reshape what we understand by "sacrifice."

According to Leviticus, the worshipper had to bring an animal of a specified type. The animal had to be without blemish. Then the worshipper would move through a sequence of rituals with the animal.

The worshipper laid hands on the animal, incorporating himself into the animal as his substitute. This union with the sacrificial animal is the basis of the whole system. And, then, because the worshipper was a sinner, the animal had to die. The animal is cut to pieces with a knife. But the animal was also without blemish and so the animal underwent transformation – a resurrection and an ascension.

Biblical sacrifice includes a death, *but also a resurrection*. Biblical sacrifices are always living in that sense. The animal was killed, but after that everything in the sacrificial liturgy is about transformation. After the blood is poured out as payment for sin, the animal is turned into smoke on God's altar fire. That's not a picture of hell. The wages of sin is death and the animal has already died. Sin has already been paid for.

The fire is the fire of the Spirit – think of Pentecost, where fire comes upon the disciples, not hell. It was the power of the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and glorified him that was poured out on the disciples in flames of fire. The fire transforms the animal into something new. The fire purifies and glorifies and makes the animal fit for God's presence. And as the smoke ascends, it becomes a sweet smelling aroma to the Lord – it becomes an acceptable and holy sacrifice, rises up to become part of the glory cloud around God's throne.

The animal passed through a knife and flame on its way into God's presence. That should sound familiar— Remember what happened after Adam and Eve sinned? They were cast out of Eden. Cherubim were put at the entrance to Eden as guardians of the garden-sanctuary, blocking the way of sinful men back into the presence of God. Later on, the veils in the tabernacle and temple had pictures of cherubim. Those cherubim had flaming swords. In other words, to get back into the garden – to get back into paradise – to get back into the presence of God, the sanctuary, the holy of holies, the most holy place – you have to pass through sword and flame. You have to be sacrificed. Those animal sacrifices represented the

worshipper as they passed through sword and flame and ascended as smoke into the heavenly presence of God, the heavenly sanctuary. The animal died for the worshipper's sin, but then he entered the glorious presence of God, as the worshipper's representative.

The sword and flame have another meaning as well. The sword, Hebrews 4 tells us, is the word of God. Its living and active, cutting soul and spirit, piercing and penetrating to the very depths of our being. The word of God – the gospel – makes us into sacrifices before God. But that can only happen as the flame of the Spirit is at work. The fire of the Spirit uses the sword of word to cut us apart, to rearrange and glorify our lives, to make us into acceptable sacrifices before the Lord. All this is in view of God's mercy. It's all IN CHRIST, as Paul says again and again. In him, we die; in him we rise and ascend. That's what sacrifice – sword and flame – are all about.

So that's what it means to be a living sacrifice. It means death and resurrection becomes the pattern of your life. It means *dying, we live*. It means the patterns of Christ's life becomes the pattern of our existence, the form or shape of our lives in the world. Our lifestyles arise out of the life and death and resurrection – the sacrifice -- of Christ. And so: It means we give ourselves away in love and service, as we die to our own agenda and desires, as God's fire and sword transforms us into something new and glorious.

But we can be more specific. Paul says we are to be living sacrifices. But if you look back at the book of Leviticus you find that there are four different kinds of sacrifice. (Paul has this in mind – there is no doubt. We have to know the “OT” to know what Paul is talking about with any depth.) We could ask, which kind of sacrifice? It must be all of them, ultimately. We've already discussed these as they relate to our worship service (in Sunday School), but they also provide a pattern for life in general. Worship is sacrificial, but worship is just a more concentrated form of what we're to do in all of life everyday. All of life takes its cue from worship; all of life becomes worship as the pattern of sacrificial worship spills over and becomes the pattern of life.

In Leviticus, there's the sin offering, the ascension offering, the tribute offering, and the peace offering – each is described in detail in Leviticus 1-7. What do they mean? Let's take each in turn and see how they each emphasize a different aspect of Christian living. (Interestingly, I think you can find each type of sacrifice spelled out in this section of Romans – but we cannot take time to do that today!)

What does it mean for us to offer ourselves as sin offering? It means we will have broken and contrite hearts. It means our church will never be a place of pride or self-righteousness. It means that when prodigals come back, none of us will play the part of the elder brother. It means our church will be a place where sinners can find welcome, despite all the messiness and brokenness of their lives, and they can find comfort and encouragement in the gospel. A community that offers itself as a corporate sin offering is a place of mercy – where forgiveness is found, where mercy is found.

One distressing problem in the evangelical church today is that so many congregations are really only welcoming to people who haven't *already* made a mess of their lives. But if you have “a past” you're basically excluded. THAT OUGHT NOT TO BE. The church is not a club for “super Christians,” it's not a Jesus appreciation society for the

ultra-sanctified. The church is a place for sinners who need hope and new life and forgiveness.

The only difference between any of us and the biggest sinner in the city of Birmingham is the magnitude of the debt. And when it comes down to it, what's the difference between owing God \$90 billion or \$91 billion? One billion dollars may seem like a lot but *none of us can pay what we owe*. Don't focus on the gap between you and others, but the gap between you and God, apart from Christ.

The ground is level at the foot of the cross – the cross is the great equalizer – we're all sinners, we all need rescue. God picks us up right where we are, not where we should have been. And if God does that for us, we should be willing to do it for others. To live as sin offering means you go before God seeking forgiveness for your sin, through humble contrition, waiting for him to lift you up with assuring grace. And it also means you're ready in turn to extend forgiveness to other sinners. You as ready to give forgiveness as you are eager to receive it.

And so it doesn't matter what kind of week you've had or what kind of life you've had – if you kneel before God and confess your sin and then arise to hear the good news of God's forgiveness in faith, your sin offering is acceptable and holy. And so living as a sin offering means living a life of continual confession, of seeking God's forgiveness and remaining humble.

We see the sin offering in concentrated form in the liturgy, when we kneel to confess sin and then rise to receive absolution. But on a daily basis we live as sin offerings when we continually live out the pattern of seeking and granting forgiveness.

If the sin offering reminds us that *God accepts us as we are*, the other offerings remind us that *he doesn't let us stay that way*.

The second offering, the ascension offering, means our lives are to be completely consecrated to God's service. This is because of the work of the word and the Spirit. After the ascension offering is killed, it's cut up into pieces.

To offer yourself in this way means you're willing to allow the double edged sword of the word to chop up your life, to rearrange the pieces of it on God's altar – Hebrews 4 – the word is living and powerful, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart. To be a living ascension offering means the fire of God's Spirit continually works in you to transform you – consumes and purifies your whole life. Sword/word and fire/Spirit consecrate us to God's service.

This offering is food for God according to Leviticus. The sacrifice is called God's bread. See, as you consecrate yourself to God's service, God "eats" you. He incorporates you into himself – that's what Leviticus teaches – you are incorporated into the life of the trinity. Of course, if you're not faithful, God will spit you out, as Christ says in Revelation 3. (The question there in Revelation 3 is, "What are we doing in Jesus' mouth to begin with?" The book of Leviticus answers. We want to be tasty sacrifices to God. We do not want to be lukewarm mush that he has to spit – or vomit – out.)

So, to live as an ascension offering is to live in communion with God. If we offer ourselves as ascension offerings, we will live *heavenly* lives – we’ll do God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. Our lives will ascend before the Lord as a sweet smelling aroma, a pleasant fragrance of love will cover all we do. This is what it means to “present” ourselves as sacrifices before God.

This is, after all, the “going up” offering – and Paul says in Ephesians 2 we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies. He says in Colossians 3 our lives are hidden with Christ in God, so we should set out minds on the things of heaven, seeking that which is above.

What that means is we seek to be together a colony of heaven on earth. We are a missional outpost of heaven right here in B’ham, AL. We seek to live according to heaven’s standards rather than this world’s standards. We seek to embody the ways of culture of heaven on earth. One thing about colonization to remember – in setting up a colony you take the culture of the mother country to a new place and plant it there – and usually colonies aren’t content with just being a subculture in the new land – they want to claim the whole place for the mother country. So if we’re citizens of heaven, planting a colony of heaven here in Birmingham, our desire is to bring the culture of heaven, heaven’s way of life, to earth, to this city, to give this place a window onto heaven’s lifestyle. And as Jonathan Edwards said, heaven is a world of love – love that is perfect in holiness and compassion – that’s the way of life we’re called to manifest. And this is a bodily sacrifice, remember – so it means a love that is incarnational, it’s a love that reaches out in action – not just in ideas and words, but in deeds, in actions of kindness and mercy and compassion.

Then there’s the tribute offering. This one is not an animal sacrifice, but a bread sacrifice – and that’s okay because just as animals symbolize people, so bread symbolizes people too. (Ex.: 12 loaves in the temple symbolized the 12 tribes. Also, 1 Cor. 10 – the bread is a sign of the body of Christ, which in turn is the church.)

What does it mean for us to offer ourselves as a living tribute offering to the Lord? The tribute is our works and the fruit of those works. In the ascension offering, we offer ourselves, here we offer the fruit of lives – what we produce and accomplish and acquire.

Think about bread. You don’t find bread in the world – bread is what you get when man transforms the raw material of the earth into something useful. It’s the fruit of agricultural labor, but it’s symbolic of all of culture – it takes a civilization to produce bread. So this offering means we’re to take our human culture – our whole way of life, all that we produce, all our rituals and customs and songs and stories, and our work and play -- and turn all of that into tribute to the Lord. The word for “tribute” in Lev. Could also be used for tax paid to a king. That’s what the tribute offering is – we’re paying our dues to the king of the universe. It’s a royal offering, a royal sacrifice – it’s what we offer in our service to the world’s true king.

So the tribute offering is a lens through which we can see our work as belonging to God. Work is holy. *Our work matters to God* -- because it’s an acceptable sacrifice. And *God matters to our work* – he sanctifies our work, he gives it worth and value and its eternal

significance. He calls us to pursue our callings with excellence worthy of his name, for in this way, we honor him. We work for him, not merely for earthly or human masters.

The tribute offering can also be connected to how we use the fruit of our labors. When we work we make money, and a portion of that money is to be offered to the Lord sacrificially to support the work of his kingdom.

When we give generously, God regards it as a sacrificial offering. Hebrews 13 says, “Do good and share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” Sharing is viewed as a sacrificial act. Whatever you share with your neighbor is really and truly offered to God.

In Philippians 4, Paul thanks the Philippian church for their monetary gift to his ministry. He says, “I’ve received the thing you sent, it was an acceptable sacrifice, with a sweet smelling aroma, well pleasing to God.” Generosity is sacrificial. It’s tribute given to the Lord. When we give to support the church – tithes and offerings – we are rendering tribute. The church is central in representing the kingdom of God on earth. It is the one institution in the world that is tied directly to the eternal kingdom of Christ.

So there is a concentrated form of the tribute offering in worship, when we give tithes and offerings. This is the most directly obvious way we turn our work into worship. In the world, we turn work into money, and in worship, we turn that money (the fruit of labor) into worship.

But more generally, all that we do in the world, whether it makes any money or not, is to be done as tribute to our Great and High King. He is worthy of the best we can offer. Do your work in such a way that he will be pleased to have his signature on it, that he will be pleased to claim it as his own.

Finally, there’s the peace offering. What does it mean to live as a peace offering? In the liturgy, the peace offering corresponds to the Lord’s Supper. All the Old Covenant feasts were types of peace offerings and that comes over to us in the Lord’s table. God offers us peace through the self-offering of his Son. We eat the peace offering and we become peace offerings. The table is a table of peace. We eat the sacrifice of Christ as a way of coming to share in him and his benefits. You are what you eat – at the table we become the body of Christ, scars and all -- we become a sacrificial, cruciform people.

But once again, the peace offering is to spill over into the rest of life. What we do in the liturgy is to shape and control the rest of life. There are a lot of ways to think about this. To be a peace offering means to be a peacemaker, to offer forgiveness to those who wrong you, to refuse to harbor bitterness. I think one of the most effective ways to be a peace offering is to show hospitality. God shows us hospitality. He invites us into his house for a meal at his table – and so we now duplicate this towards others.

Hospitality certainly means having friends and family into your home. But biblical hospitality goes beyond that – after all, even pagans get together with friends and family. Hospitality in Scripture is especially focused on the outsider, the stranger, the person who’s different from you, the person who can’t reciprocate or pay you back, the person who is new

to the community, the person who has nothing to offer in return, the person who has real needs that you can meet.

Funny things happen when God's people entertain strangers. In Matthew 25, some show Jesus hospitality without even knowing it. In Hebrews 13, we're told of those who unwittingly entertained angels.

I really like what an Egyptian monk said about his monastery's practice of hospitality: "We treat every guest like an angel – just in case!" That's a good motif for hospitality. In hospitality, you offer not only your body, but your family, your home, and your time as a sacrifice. Pretend you are entertaining angels. Who knows how that works... But we do know from Matthew 25 that the poor and needy that God brings across our path represent Jesus to us. That's even better than entertaining angels – we get to entertain Jesus!! When you invite guests over, you are inviting Christ over. Treat them accordingly. This is the least you can do – Christ invited you to his house and feeds you the best fare on a weekly basis. In turn, we should invite (his representatives) into our homes and lives.

So that's what it means to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice – it means we live as *sin offerings*, so we're humble and broken over our sin, Psalm 51 style. It means we're patient and forbearing towards others. We live as *ascension offerings*, devoting ourselves to God's service in our callings, and in every other facet of life, living heavenly lives. It means we live as a fragrant aroma before the Lord in all that we do, rising before his throne. We live as *tribute offerings*, giving sacrificially to the church and those in need, transforming culture into a gift for God. We render service to our high King; we give him his due; we make his worth known throughout the world by the worth of our work. And we live as *peace offerings*, extending God's "shalom," and opening our lives and homes to others as God has done with us. We make peace, we offer peace, we embody peace. God has made peace with us in Christ; in turn, we desire to live at peace with others as much as it depends upon us.

If you read Romans 12-16 you can see all this worked out. Paul unfolds these sacrificial patterns in the rest of the letter. He takes sacrifice as his overriding motif for the Christian life and unpacks it.

But I want to focus on verse 2: What happens when we live sacrificially? We become a different kind of people – no longer conformed to the pattern of this world, but instead we're renewed – and we begin to find and fulfill God's good and perfect will.

As we embrace this pattern of sacrifice, we begin living as *God's new humanity* – we no longer belong to this world, but to the world to come – we begin living the life of the future, of the resurrection, in the present. And so the world's treasures become trinkets to us. And our treasures look like trinkets to the world. We embrace a new scale of values, a new way of viewing the world and living in it overtakes us.

See, we are called to put on display an alternative way of life – and it's holistic. In verse 1 our *bodies* are living sacrifices; in verse 2 our *minds* are renewed. We begin to live life inside and out, individually and corporately, as God intended, in a way that pleases him, that fulfills God's plan and design for his image bearers. This is Paul's vision for the Christian life.

The path to self-fulfillment is self-sacrifice. Sacrifice goes with the grain of the deepest realities in the universe – the Trinitarian love of God, as father, Son, and Spirit, and the love of the God-Man, Jesus on the cross. We were made to give and receive sacrificial love; nothing else can ever satisfy or complete us. But this is not just rooted in the past – it the way of our future life in Christ, breaking and bursting into the present.

Because of the Spirit, God's new age is being made a reality in our lives even now. And when we live in accord with these great realities, we please God, we feel God's pleasure, and our whole pattern of life becomes living sacrifice -- death, resurrection, ascension. Its acceptable to him in Christ.

As we learn together, in community, what it means to live sacrificially, we find this is the roadmap God has given us through the present wilderness time. When we stop and ask directions, God gives us the road map of sacrifice, and says, "Here this will get you home. This will lead you to treasure. This is the way to fulfill what you were made for." If we're confused, if we're lost, if we're feeling like we've been stranded in an unexplored frontier, this is the sure way we should follow. Walk in the way of sacrifice.

Let's pray for God's help – that we might offer bodies together as a single living sacrifice to him in Christ.