

Do You Sacrifice Enough?

"I know I am not sacrificing enough", we hear some humble disciple confess. He has just been touched by a plea from the pulpit that everyone should sacrifice more. The urgency was reinforced by the singing of "I gave, I gave my life for thee; what hast thou given for me?"

This good brother works long hours to provide meager sustenance to his family. He attends both Sunday services, and though it is difficult, he is usually at the midweek service. He has little extra money or time to devote to the church program. In his sincere dedication, he feels that he is not giving and serving enough to give him a real claim for salvation. This bothers him all the time and makes him feel insecure before the Lord.

Does this describe your situation? Do you sacrifice enough? Does discipleship almost become too burdensome for you? How much must we sacrifice?

Let's look at that word sacrifice. It is a good word, but it has been painted over with ritualistic colors, reshaped by concepts of achievement, decorated with merit, enhanced by self-commendation, stripped of its grace, and stolen from Jesus. Under all that disguise, we can hardly recognize the word!

The basic meaning of sacrifice is offering. To sacrifice is to make an offering. A sacrifice is that which is offered. There is nothing qualitative or quantitative in the definition of the word. The term does not define the nature of the offering, the size or amount of it, its worth, its cost to the giver, or the attitude of the worshipper.

Traditionally, we have attached the concept of pain, deprivation, self-effacement, and merit to this word. Let us examine some aspects of acceptable sacrifice, or offering, to see the simplicity of what it is.

1. Paul considered the faith of disciples to be a sacrifice: "Even if I am poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all" (Phil. 2:17). The faith of the Philippians was a metaphorical offering of thanksgiving upon which Paul's life was depicted as being poured as an additional sacrifice of thanksgiving. Perhaps, our faith is the purest and simplest offering we can extend toward God.

2. When Paul left Macedonia, the Philippian church sent monetary support as a gift to him. In response, he wrote, "I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18). Did this mean that they impoverished themselves by this gift, thus making it sacrificial? Regardless of the amount, or whether it put them in financial strain or not, it was an acceptable sacrifice because it was a gift of love.

3. We are urged, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Heb. 13:16). Doing good is expressing concern in daily life and it has little to do with church programs or attendance. Sharing is sacrificial even when it is done out of our abundance. It may be nothing more than a cup of cold water (Matt. 10:42).

4. Even a testimony or song of praise is a sacrifice: "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb. 13:15). "Thank you, Lord" is a painless sacrifice.

5. Then there is the familiar exhortation of Paul: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). This calls for our complete sanctification, or holiness, as a

life-offering dedicated to God. It speaks of no meritorious achievements or continuous privation, but of our purpose in living in Christ.

6. Peter changes the metaphor from a bodily sacrifice to a priest making the offering. He says we are "to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Combining the metaphors, we see ourselves as both the sacrifice and the priest offering it. We sacrifice ourselves in continuous whole-life consecration.

Now, if your whole life is a continuous offering, can there be any question about whether you are sacrificing enough? What more have you to offer?

These metaphors allude to the sacrificial system of the Law of Moses. The first-born lamb was holy, dedicated to God. But it had to be fed and nurtured for months before it was slaughtered. All of the provisions for its needs were parts of its sanctification as an offering. Feeding and protecting it, though necessary elements of the offering, added no meritorious quality to the sacrifice. The sacrifice was being made daily as the shepherd cared for the needs of the lamb before the time of slaughter.

Drawing from those allusions, we may see ourselves as holy and dedicated to God, sanctified for his use. But our bodies continue to need food, shelter, clothing, exercise, relaxation, and medications. Although provision for those needs may not seem as high and holy as sessions of prayer and praise, they are necessary elements of our sacrifice. They may not seem as sacrificial (meritorious) as taking in an orphan, paying a widow's bills, preaching the gospel, or serving as a deacon, yet they are necessary, enabling elements of the sacrifice. All these activities are spiritual sacrifices because they are all dedicated to God.

But what about the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14f)? Are we not called upon to do good works? Yes, but no quota was demanded of each servant. The servant with one talent felt that he could not sacrifice sufficiently to earn his way; so he retreated into fear. The other two servants used what was entrusted to them, but it is the Master who gives more to him who has. God gives the increase, and that reflects no merit for the servant. We only invest our gift with the Banker by use of our talent in serving his people.

"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death. Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:14f). This describes the sacrificial life measured only by fulfilling love. The many other exhortations to do good works are governed by this same principle.

In the Judgment Scene parable (Matt. 25: 31f), those on His right hand were welcomed because they had given food, drink, hospitality, and clothing to the needy, and care for the sick and imprisoned. Our sacrifices in these activities are offerings to Jesus!

Do I sacrifice enough to be welcomed? How much is enough? What quota must I fill to be deserving of eternal life? You can offer no such sacrifice! Jesus made the only offering of merit. The activities mentioned by Jesus listed above are expressions of love, not philanthropic deeds demanding reward. Because of God's love for us, we love his people. We praise him in serving their needs. Malice and selfishness separate us from God for they cause us to withhold our love and thanksgiving. Yes, these can give us anxiety and make us feel insecure. So we must work on our attitude rather than trying to perform self-commending works. If the attitude is right, the quantity and quality of works have no quotas or limits. The only regulatory law is love.

Our offerings are not enumerated in some legal code. The colors of achievement must not be painted over our expressions of love and thanksgiving. Our selfless giving will not decorate a crown with stars for us. Praise is not a commendation of ourselves to God. The merit of sacrifice cannot be stolen from Christ and applied to our deeds, for we are saved by his merit rather than our own. ("Her life was so filled with good works; if she does not make it to heaven, I don't have a chance!") We must not diminish from Christ's grace by feeling that we can do works in repayment for any portion of it.

The well-intended, but unsettling, exhortations of the preacher are not to be trusted like these words of Jesus: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28f).

Can I make any trade-off with Jesus as our song might suggest: "I gave, I gave my life for thee; what hast thou given for me"? Perhaps so, in this sense: Jesus gives me his sacrifice of merit, and I give him my offering of love and praise. Then I am sacrificing enough! Lance Lane
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