

A Pleasing Sacrifice  
Hebrews 13:10-16

August 28, 2016

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

In the midst of our self-centered and overindulgent culture, sacrifice is still seen as a good thing – if the goal of the sacrifice is noble and the benefits and rewards for the sacrifice are worth it. For example, parents these days will sacrifice great amounts of time, travel, and money for their children to succeed in sports. Many people will sacrifice many minor pleasures so that they are able to purchase a big ticket item – a boat, a camper, or a cabin. Lovers of sweets will give up all desserts to lose weight. Workout warriors will give up their breath and plenty of sweat in order to get in shape.

Where this becomes a problem is when one applies this principle of self-sacrifice in order to gain benefits to our lives with God. We may think that we establish or maintain our relationship with God by giving something up. Or, we may think we can coerce blessings out of God by doing something sacrificial. That makes sense in our culture's thinking but is it true?

What if we try to be good and give up sin? Many people believe that the way to make God like you and accept you is to behave and offer up good deeds that you have done. By doing enough good, you can counter balance the bad you've done and get to heaven. As we prepare for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation next year, we are reminded that that's what Luther experienced and tried to do: give up sin and do better so that God would like him and bless him.

A sneakier approach is the idea that God saves us but it is our pious lives in which we give up things for God that will help us gain blessing from Him. It used to be that people thought giving up things like smoking, drinking, and dancing that would make God happier with you. Others thought it was being in church every Sunday and every special service in the right "church clothes" that did the trick. Others may think they are better Christians if they attend every church event, serve on various boards and committees at church (or even District or Synod), and only listen to Christian music and only watch Christian movies. If we are pious enough and show it in our lives, then God will bless us even more for such sacrifices that we have made.

As much as this way of thinking appeals to us, it cannot work. Even if you could control your actions so as to give up sin and offer appropriate good works to God in their place, there's more to it than that. We see that in the story of Jesus' encounter with a rich young man. This man came up to Jesus and boldly asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16) He thought he could do it all. Jesus lets him go on talking about how he had obeyed all the commandments.

Finally, Jesus tells him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21) Now Jesus wasn't giving the young man one more thing to do to earn his way into heaven. Jesus was testing the man's heart. And the young man failed the test. It says, "When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." (Matthew 19:22) While the young man could DO all the right things (possibly), his heart and attitude were disobeying the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment.

The same is true for us as well. Even if we obey God through our actions and are able to offer a sacrifice of good works to Him that appear to be enough, they are never enough. Our thoughts, attitudes, and desires will betray us. While we may control the actions of our body (possibly), who can perfectly, completely, and continually control the activities of our minds and hearts? It's impossible!

Secondly, if you are going to try and impress God with your pious lives after you've been saved by God, be aware that you can't pick and choose which parts of the law you're going to use. You have to do it all. The Galatians were a people who thought it was necessary to submit to circumcision and other parts of the Law to be right with God. However, St. Paul wrote to them, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" The Law is a demanding master. It's all or nothing with the Law if you try to stand before God on the basis of it. Even if we sacrificed all that we had, it would never be enough.

Fortunately, we don't have to. The writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers and us of the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. The people of the Old Testament did not get right with God by obeying the Law of God or by their religious piety. The lives of animals were sacrificed for the sins of the people. Their

deaths were counted as the punishment for the sins of the people. The blood of the animals was counted as cleansing the people of their sins.

But these sacrifices, as effective as they were, being based on a promise of God, were but a sign of a greater sacrifice that was to come with a greater effect to be had. Instead of countless animals to be sacrificed day after day, Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, would come to be the final and complete sacrifice. Instead of being the sacrifice for the sins of Israel only, Jesus came to be the sacrifice for the sins of the entire world for all time, including you and me.

Our text says, “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.” Jesus is the perfect and complete sacrifice for your sins and mine. No sacrifice needs to be made by us by our obedience to the Law or by our pious living. Nothing needs to be added to Jesus’ sacrifice. He has done it all for you. He has sanctified you (i.e. has made you holy) by His own blood shed by His death on the cross for you. He has demonstrated the truth of this promise in the most glorious way imaginable: by rising from His grave to life again. Trusting in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for you (instead of any sacrifice you think you’ve made for Him), you are prepared to stand before a holy God on the Last Day and to live with all the saints – the holy people of God – in His presence forever.

The sacrifices we have left to make are very different in nature and in purpose. We may suffer for following Christ. This is becoming more and more apparent as time goes on. We will “bear the reproach he endured,” as our text says. We may suffer rejection, insults, persecution, and even death for our faith as He did. But this is not a sacrifice on our parts for our sin. This is suffering as a result of the sacrifice by Jesus to gain forgiveness for our sin. We bear it willingly and cheerfully in response to Christ’s saving work for us.

There are two sacrifices we are called to make as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice for us. Neither are made in an attempt to earn God’s favor for us, but both are made as a response to God’s favor which we already have as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice for us.

Our first sacrifice is praise. As our text says, “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” We gather here, not to bring animals to be killed or a list of good works to be offered to gain the favor of God and earn His forgiveness, but to offer our praise, in word and song, for the everlasting favor of God which we already have and for the never ending supply of forgiveness for all of our sins of thought, word, and deed which God continually grants us in Holy Absolution, in the Word of God, read and declared, and in the Lord’s Supper. It is a joyful activity which we want to do continually.

Our second sacrifice is good works. As our text says, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” We leave here, not to attempt to impress God with our pious living, but to live lives of praise in deed and not just in word. We don’t have to *do* anything for God.

First of all, Jesus has already done everything that needs to be done for you with God. There’s nothing you need to do. Second of all, as Martin Luther said, “God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor does.” There’s nothing God needs you to do for Him. Yet your neighbor (i.e. every person God sends into your life) is in need of your service, your help, and your sharing. Therefore, in response to our Savior’s sacrifice for us that gained for us forgiveness, life, and salvation, we sacrifice our time, our service, and our material goods for our neighbors. This, more than pious living, pleases God and benefits our neighbor.

“Sacrifice” is an important Biblical word that must be understood correctly and never confused with our culture’s concept of sacrifice. First, Jesus sacrifices for us by His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. We never sacrifice for Jesus by our obedience and pious living. Second, Jesus’ sacrifice benefits us. Our sacrifices benefit our neighbor. Thirdly, Jesus’ sacrifice gives us forgiveness, life and salvation. Our sacrifices give our neighbor service and a share of what God has given to us. Understood THAT way makes for a pleasing sacrifice for both God and for our neighbor, too. Amen.