

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 6, 2008**

## **THE TROUBLE WITH LIVING SACRIFICES**

### **Romans 12:1-8**

I want to talk with you today about the trouble with living sacrifices. Paul says here in Romans 12:1 that in view of God's mercy – in light of all that God in His mercy and grace has accomplished for us and for our salvation in Christ, we are to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices.

Animal sacrifices were central to the religious life of the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Whether bull or lamb or goat, the priest would first kill the animal, then cut it into pieces and lay it on the altar of fire. These sacrifices of the old covenant had to be killed in order to serve their purpose. But Paul says that we are to offer our bodies – our whole selves – as living sacrifices. Not dead corpses, but living, breathing bodies.

When the priest placed the animal sacrifice on the altar, he could be confident the sacrifice would remain on the altar. The trouble with living sacrifices is that they don't always stay on the altar. Living sacrifices have a tendency to fall off the altar through inattention or distraction. Some kind of distraction attracts our attention, and we end up somewhere or in some spiritual condition we never intended. Sort of like the frog in the kettle of warm water which doesn't realize it is slowly being boiled to death until it is too late. A living sacrifice can easily fall off the altar without ever intending to.

Living sacrifices also have a tendency to crawl off the altar – something a dead animal sacrifice could never do. How does that happen? It happens through selfish choices we make. It happens when we say to God: "Not Your will but my will be done." It happens when we decide to pursue selfish interests or to seek our personal happiness as the goal of life. It happens when we choose to conform in our attitudes and actions to the spirit and values of the world around us.

That is the trouble with living sacrifices. Living sacrifices do not always stay on the altar of consecration to God. And yet, a living sacrifice is what God calls you and me to be. With consecrated bodies and renewed minds.

Notice that the ground (or basis) of Paul's appeal here in Romans 12 is God's mercy. One translation of verse 1 goes like this: "Think of God's mercies, my brothers, and worship Him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy – by offering Him your living bodies" (Jerusalem Bible). John Stott has said there is no greater incentive to holy living than a contemplation of the mercies of God. Think of what God has done for you in the incarnation, sinless life, vicarious suffering, atoning death and resurrection from the dead of His Son Jesus Christ. Contemplate the wonders of God's grace and mercy shown to you. Ponder the truth of the gospel that because of His mercy and grace, God does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities (Psalm 103:10). In

view of all this – in the light of God’s sovereign grace revealed to us in the unfolding plan of salvation – what kind of people should we be? How should we live?

The answer is clear. God wants us to offer our bodies to Him as living sacrifices consecrated to Him to be used for His purposes.

Today, by my reckoning, is the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. It is Epiphany Sunday, which celebrates the epiphany or appearing of the Lord Jesus in flesh and blood. Christmas involves not just God’s gift to us of His Son to be our Savior. To close the loop on Christmas we need to see that there is intended to be an exchange of gifts. God has taken the initiative in giving us the gift of His Son. Our proper response is to give God the gift He desires – by presenting our bodies to Him as a living sacrifice.

Often, in the tradition of evangelical Christianity, we invite people to give their hearts to God as a sign of their faith. One of the songs we sang this morning – a worship song I love – has the words: “Lord, I give you my heart.” We focus on the heart as the center of our spiritual life. And rightly so. But here in Romans 12, Paul says we are to offer our *bodies* to God. (The Greek word here is *soma*, which refers to the physical body.)

Does this mean that the heart, as the center of our inner life, is not important? Certainly not. What it means is that it is in our bodies and with these bodies of ours that we are to worship God. It may be that when Paul speaks here of the offering of our bodies, he is referring symbolically to the whole of our being. Or perhaps he means that the body is the vehicle by which and through which the heart expresses itself. Whatever the case, by speaking of the offering of our bodies, he is not diminishing the spiritual significance of the heart.

Elsewhere, in Romans 6:13, Paul says: “Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather, offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to Him as instruments of righteousness.” Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in *The Message* goes like this:

You must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don’t give it the time of day. Don’t even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves whole-heartedly and full-time into God’s way of doing things.

What you and I do with our bodies has profound spiritual significance. How we conduct ourselves is intended by God to be an act of worship. We are to worship God by what we do in and with our bodies. To present our bodies to God as living sacrifices, says Paul, is our “spiritual act of worship.”

The word translated “spiritual” here is the Greek word *logikos*. It can be translated “spiritual,” as the NIV does. Or it may be translated “reasonable” or “logical.” If “spiritual” is the correct translation, Paul is emphasizing the physical-spiritual connection. He is saying that in view of what God has done in His mercy and grace, the

only appropriate spiritual response involves the offering of our bodies – our entire beings – to God as an act of worship. If “reasonable” or “logical” is the primary meaning, it emphasizes the engagement of our minds as well as our bodies and emotions in worship that is pleasing to God. And such worship – worship that comes from the core of our being and engages our whole being – is really the only reasonable thing to do.

It is clear that God wants more than just our physical bodies consecrated to Him. In verse 2, Paul indicates that God is concerned about our minds as well. He says: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

The consecrated life – the life consecrated by the offering of our bodies to God as living sacrifices – is meant to be a transformed life. A changed life. The word for “transformed” here is the Greek word *metamorphoo* – the origin of our word “metamorphosis.”

God’s will for your life and mine is not conformity to the ways and values and prevailing spirit of the world, but transformation into the likeness of Christ. How does this transformation take place? It takes place by the renewing of our minds. How does the renewing of our minds take place? It takes place by the work of the Spirit of God and the Word of God (which is “the sword of the Spirit”) in our lives.

There is no way you and I can keep from being conformed to the world and its ways unless we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we cultivate the mind and heart of Christ. To have the mind of Christ is to look at life the way Jesus does. To see life in this world the way Jesus sees it. To value what Jesus values. To embrace His purpose for our lives. Which is to serve God. To seek to know and to do His will, not our own. To make it our aim to please Him in all things and above all else.

Instead of becoming so well-adjusted to our culture that we simply fit into it without thinking (*The Message*); instead of allowing the world to squeeze us into its own mold (J. B. Phillips); as our minds are renewed by the ministry of God’s Word and Spirit, we can then grasp and embrace and carry out the will of God.

I urge you, my brothers and sisters, in view of God’s marvelous mercy and magnificent grace, to present your bodies as living sacrifices consecrated to Him. For this is the only response that makes sense.

The trouble with living sacrifices, though, is that they do not always stay on the altar. Have you fallen off the altar without even knowing it? Have you crawled off the altar in conscious disobedience to God in some area of your life?

You can’t pick and choose when or where you will obey God if you’re a living sacrifice. You can’t pick and choose where or how you will serve God, if you have offered your body – your whole being – to Him as a living sacrifice. You can’t say to God: “I’ll do this... but don’t ask me to do that.”

As someone has pointed out:

The world is a better place because an artist name Michelangelo did not say: “I don’t do ceilings.”

The world is a better place because a priest named Martin Luther did not say: “I don’t do doors.”

The world is a better place because George Whitefield, the sparkplug of the First Great Awakening, did not say: “I don’t do preaching in fields.”

The world is a better place because Mother Teresa didn’t say: “I don’t do lepers.”

The world is a better place because Moses didn’t say: “I don’t do Pharaohs or mass migrations.”

The world is a better place because Noah didn’t say: “I don’t do arks and animals.”

The world is a better place because Rahab didn’t say: “I don’t do enemy spies.”

The world is a better place because Ruth didn’t say: “I don’t do mothers-in-law.”

The world is a better place because David didn’t say: “I don’t do giants.”

The world is a better place because Mary didn’t say: “I don’t do virgin births.”

The world is a better place because Paul didn’t say: “I don’t do letters.”

The world is a better place because Jesus didn’t say: “I don’t do crosses.”

And the world will be a better place if you and I do not say to God: “I don’t do...” whatever it is that God calls us to do as living sacrifices consecrated to Him.

(Adapted from Leonard Sweet)

The world will be a better place if we offer our bodies – our whole beings – to God as living sacrifices devoted to Him. It will bring glory to God. And besides, in view of what God has done and given for us, it is the only reasonable thing to do.

May it be so in each of us in 2008 and for as long as we live. Amen.