

“Doing Good: Sacrifice” Romans 12:1-2

Last Sunday the Tokyo Olympics concluded with a great ceremony. Canadians cheered (from home) for the athletes who represented their country. Canadian athletes won 24 medals and many set personal, and even Olympic, bests. Athletes like gold medalists Damian Warner, Kelsey Mitchell, Andre De Grasse, Maggie Mac Neil and Maude Charron will be the ones to beat in 2024. But every athlete who made it to the Olympics, who competed against the best in the world, got there not by chance or luck, but by hard work, dedication and sacrifice.

Damian Warner won the gold medal in the decathlon, ten track and field events that call for speed, strength, agility and endurance. There is no way that Mr. Warner was stuffing himself with MacDonald French fries and milk shakes up until his flight to Tokyo. He did not start training a few weeks before the event. His whole life is dedicated to the goal of performing well. No doubt he has a strict exercise regiment, a carefully controlled diet and his focus is on constantly improving his performance.

Sacrifice.

The Apostle Paul loves the image of the athlete as a metaphor for the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 9:26 he says he “does not run aimlessly, nor does he fight like a boxer beating the air.”

In Hebrews 12:1 the Apostle describes a stadium and a race that sounds very much like the Olympics. There he says we must lay aside any weight that might slow us down, and every sin that could entangle us so that we can run the spiritual race set before us.

And here in Romans 12:1 the Apostle reminds us that just as the Olympic athlete must be committed to achieve success, so the Christian must be “all in” to finish the race well. The Spirit is calling Christians to commit themselves completely to following Jesus – no part time believers, no half-hearted commitment. He uses one word to describe this commitment.

Sacrifice.

Hear again what the Holy Spirit says to us through the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices...

We are on a journey to see how we can fulfill the command in 12:21 to overcome evil with good.

We noted that we cannot do what is truly good, that which pleases and honours God, because we are sinful. Until the sin problem is dealt with, we will never be good.

But we also were reminded to focus on the mercy of God. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. God, through Christ, provided a way for our sins to be forgiven, and cleansed from

our lives so that we might be a holy people. We need to repent of our sin, turn to Jesus for forgiveness, and we are prepared for good works in Christ.

The turning to Christ for salvation is not the end of the journey, but just the beginning. But if we have not made this most important step, if we are not born again, we cannot get to our goal of doing good. The call to sacrifice, to radical commitment is not for unbelievers, it is for Christians. The call to holiness is for God's children.

Rev. John Wesley, who impacted England for Christ in the 18th century, early in his career read a book on Holy Living, and he dedicated his life to being a "living sacrifice" for God. For fifteen years he fully committed himself to this task with a single-minded devotion which has few equals in Christian history. During this time he travelled to America to preach and do ministry, but it was a terrible failure. It was after his return to England, and after meeting Moravian Missionary Peter Bohler, that he discovered why.

Bohler patiently explained to the Oxford trained, Anglican ordained Wesley that he was trying to be sanctified without ever being justified. Wesley had not discovered the wonderful truth that we are accepted by God through the blood of Jesus, not by our merits. When Wesley finally put his trust in "Christ, Christ alone, for his salvation" he felt his heart strangely warmed.

Now he could offer himself as a living sacrifice. Now he could, by God's grace, truly do good so that evil would be overcome. First he had to be saved before he could be sanctified.¹

So I start today with a simple question: Have you repented of your sin and committed your life to following Jesus?

If yes, then stay with me...

The call for the brothers and sisters of the church is to "offer their bodies as a living sacrifice" to God. Let us unpack that this morning...

When the Apostle says to offer your body as a living sacrifice, we might pass over that quickly and not catch the importance of that simple word "body".

In the Apostle Paul's day there were those who wanted to say that you save the soul, but the body does not matter. If you are okay spiritually, it does not matter how you live. They believed that what happened in the body did not affect the soul. In fact, many saw the body as a trap or a prison of the soul and the sooner you could free yourself of it the better.

But that is not a Christian perspective. What we do with the body, how we live, does affect the soul, and what is going on in our spiritual lives should affect our actions and lifestyle.

The Apostle would write to the Corinthian church,

¹ William Greathouse, *Beacon Bible Expositions: Romans*, (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 1975), 172-173

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you are bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with your body...” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

The context there is a discussion about sexual sins. Christians were having sex outside of marriage, and this is wrong. Paul says it is like being united with a prostitute. As Christians we should be united to Christ!

So what you do to your body, and with your body, is part of your spiritual journey.

We are to offer our body as a living sacrifice to God. This means to present our whole selves to God – not just some piece called a soul, but all of who we are, mind, body and soul. We offer to God all of who we are, all that we do, all that we own, all that we will become. Nothing is held back.

Paul uses the language of sacrifice, which comes from the temple. Every day there would be a sacrifice offered up to God in the temple. A sheep or goat would be killed and burned on the altar. This would be as a covering for the sins of the people of Israel. Individuals could also bring sacrifices as atonement for their sins. On the day of Passover every family in Jerusalem offered a sacrifice. Thousands of animals were killed and offered as sacrifices during that feast.

The Jewish people knew about sacrifices. The animal, be it a goat, a lamb, an ox, a pigeon or a turtledove, would be killed and put on the altar. No animal offered as a sacrifice ever came out alive.

The Apostle is saying that we must commit our all to God, nothing held back. Our whole-hearted devotion must be for God and God alone. This does not mean becoming a monk and living in a temple somewhere, but it does mean we bring God with us wherever we go, and in whatever we do.

You may have noticed that it said we are to be “living sacrifices.” For the Jew that was an oxymoron. Sacrifices do not live – they die. That is what sacrifice is all about – killing the animal and presenting it to God.

Here Paul says we are to give everything over to God, but in doing that we are not to take our lives, but to actually truly start to live. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the scriptures, renders this verse this way:

Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.

God is not asking us for a partial commitment, a part time relationship. It is not God who said we should love him on Sunday, go to church and sing his praises, and then forget about him the rest of the week. In all that we do, all the time, God should come first.

To offer yourself as a living sacrifice is to die to what you think is most important and start to live for what God says is most important. This is about complete surrender to God.

Do you think that kind of surrender to God, to be all He wants you to be, to act as he wants you to act, to love as he has loved you, would make a difference in the way people live? Would anybody notice your faith if you were sold out for God?

Hudson Taylor, missionary to China in the 1800's once said, "If your father and mother, your sister and brother, if the very cat and dog in the house, are not happier for your being Christian, it is a question whether you really are."²

No one would be willing to make a commitment like that unless they first met Jesus. This is why Paul starts with a reminder to focus on the mercies of God. Those who really get to know God, who really know and experience his love and grace, they will be more than willing to commit themselves fully to following Jesus. They are ready to sacrifice knowing they receive a hundredfold more back from God for what they give. Who can put a price on the love, joy and peace that God gives us?

The word for "present" or "offer" in this text is a Greek verb form that means you start to do something and keep on doing it. We present ourselves wholly to God in a moment of consecration, but we keep that commitment fresh on a daily basis.

This has been likened to our wedding vows. We said them once, but we live them every day for the marriage to last.

We say yes to Jesus when we become a Christian, and then we must live that commitment every day that follows. The only way to do that so that you have joy and peace in your life, and you do not get exhausted trying to do things to prove you are good enough is to surrender. Become a living sacrifice. Surrender every day, in every situation. Everything is placed in His hands.

This passage helped me when I sensed God was calling me to be a pastor. As a fifteen-year-old boy, who was wondering about his future, what classes to take in High School, I heard God call me to be a pastor. I loved my pastor but I certainly did not want his job!

But I had memorized this passage in the church's children's ministry, and I had already wrestled with the choice of surrendering my all to Christ. At an altar at teen camp I surrendered everything to Christ, asking the Holy Spirit to fill me so I could live out that commitment. I was willing to be a living sacrifice...

Therefore, I already knew my answer to God's call on my life to be a pastor. The answer was, "Yes, Lord. Whatever you ask me to do, I will do, for I am wholly yours."

God may not be asking you to be a pastor- but he might – or a missionary – but he might – but he is asking, will you surrender yourself completely to me? Will you be a living sacrifice? At home? At school? At work? In the community? In all you do, will Jesus come first?

² Tan, P. L. (1996). Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times (p. 735). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

We started with references to athletics and how our Christian walk can be compared to the athlete. Let me conclude with God's words through Paul, found in the first letter to the Corinthians. This is from the Message paraphrase:

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.

26–27 I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be *in* on it!³

May that be your desire as well.

³ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (1 Co 9:23). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress. Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (1 Co 9:24–27). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.