

Romans 12:1 Our Spiritual Worship

Paul's appeal to the *mercies of God* begins this 'practical application' part of his letter. It challenges us to consider our response to the mercies of God. Our impulse ought to be to *present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*. This is not just singing but giving our whole lives to Him.

In 1Chronicles 16 the Ark of the Covenant was being returned to Jerusalem in David's reign, and he composed a Psalm for the occasion: *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him! Worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness* (1Chronicles 16:29-30). In fact Paul uses similar language to communicate our appropriate response to God's mercies. We are to offer our bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God.

But what does it mean to present our bodies as a living sacrifice? 'To present' means, 'to put at one's disposal'. It involves surrendering, yielding, giving. But 'to present' also has within its meaning the idea of 'standing'. A field of wheat is standing and presenting itself for harvest. Jesus *showed or presented himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs* (Acts 1:3). So presenting ourselves isn't something we do in a corner, but it involves standing up, and often standing out!

But why did Paul say we are to offer our *bodies* a sacrifice? That sounds painful! Why didn't he say, *By the mercies of God, give your heart to Jesus!* The reason Paul didn't say this is because Paul wasn't a 20th century evangelical. He was thoroughly Jewish and to present your bodies meant to present yourselves. If when I say, 'I have given my heart to Jesus', I mean that I have given my whole life to him, I am on the same hymn sheet as Paul. If I mean we have only given the spiritual part of my life to Him, then I am not quite on the same page. In Romans 6:13 we can see that *present your members = present yourselves*, and this = *present your bodies*. Members are the different parts of our bodies. We all have parts of our bodies that are prone to sin, be it the eye (lust), the tongue (gossip etc) or the hand (violence). But in our new life in Christ these members ought to be given to Christ as *a living sacrifice* to serve Him.

But what sort of sacrifice ought we to be? Like the temple sacrifices our lives are to be completely dedicated to God (1Corinthians 6:19-20). This goes against the tide of cultural opinion which demands, "My body is my own and I can do what I like with it, thank you very much!" I have the right to have sex with who I like; I can abort my baby if I want; I have the right to kill myself if I want! But for the Christian our bodies belong to the Lord and we should glorify God with our bodies.

Of course a living sacrifice is the opposite of a dead sacrifice. But I think the main emphasis here is that the lives of those who are now alive in Christ are to be characterised in the way they live, following in the footsteps of our Master, who lived a sacrificial life. At the beginning of the practical section of the book of Ephesians I believe Paul is saying something very similar as in Romans 12:1, *I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love* (Ephesians 4:1-2).

This way of living is to be expressed in holy living (Leviticus 11:45). The Gentiles came from a very unholy background, which Paul articulates in Romans 1. When we come to Christ we exchange this old demonically inspired way of living (living according to the flesh), with the new way of the Spirit

(Romans 8:5-6). Romans 7 describes the tug of war we often feel between the flesh and the Spirit, a battle which will continue until the world to come. But in this world we must nevertheless consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. We can't pander to the flesh for a moment. The only place for the flesh is for it to be figuratively nailed to the cross. Giving up our sins can seem like a huge sacrifice! But it was Jim Elliot who literally gave his life for Christ in the mission field, who famously said, *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.*

This new way of living is an acceptable sacrifice, and it can be expressed in many different ways. We can offer the Lord a sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15). It can be sacrificial because it can be the last thing we feel like doing. But praise changes our perspective and this is good and pleasing to God.

Good works are pleasing sacrifices to the Lord as well (Hebrews 13:16). Paul was given a gift from the church in Philippi to help him in his work. So overwhelmed as he was by the generosity of this gift he described it as *a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God* (Philippians 4:18).

Again, in Ephesians, and using temple language, Paul describes the kind of sacrificial life to which we have been called, *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God* (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Therefore, to walk in love, if we really do, is a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God – a living sacrifice.