

Manuscript of the July 6, 2008 Sermon – Jeffrey E. Bryan

The Great Ends of the Church Series

3. The Maintenance of Divine Worship – Part 2

Our sermon topics this summer are being guided by the historic, quote-unquote “great ends” of the church. The term “great ends” is just old-timey language for “what being the church is all about.” This is who we are and this is what we do. You will see all six great ends listed on the front of your bulletin. What do you say we read those out loud together?

The great ends of the church are:

1. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
2. The shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
3. The maintenance of divine worship
4. The preservation of the truth
5. The promotion of social righteousness
6. The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world

Before we pray and read scripture, let me just point out we’re still doing the responsive “Word of the Lord, thanks be to God” thing after the reading. Will you pray with me?

Let us pray –

Romans 12:1-2

¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Friends of Jesus Christ, this is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Today we are looking at #3: the maintenance of Divine Worship. You may remember last week. We talked about how worship is not just music. Music is a wonderful thing. It's so wonderful, people argue about it a lot; and still, music is simply one tool among many we use to worship. Worship is not about my preferences, or what I can get out of it, or about me, me, me, at all. Worship is something we do together; and it is always all about God. Last week, we lifted up one way to understand what worship is: a conversation. Worship is a back and forth conversation with the very real, very present, very loving Lord. I want to lift up one more thing about worship, and that is: sacrifice.

Vacation Bible School, Hand in Hand, Children's Ministries, Session, Commissions and Deacons, not to mention 4th of July parades: some folks in this room could teach us all a thing or two about sacrifice. Folks have been making sacrifices around here for quite some time. And I am so proud of you, church.

In the Old Testament, one of if not the most important form of worship was sacrifice. You see this throughout the scriptures, especially in the book of Leviticus. Worshippers would bring stuff to the temple to be sacrificed by the priests. For example, if you wanted to make a sacrifice of grain, you would take your best flour, pour olive oil and a little spice on it, and take it to the priest. The priest would then take a handful before the Lord, burn it on the altar and the smelly smoke would be a delicious, fragrant offering to the Lord. People in Bible times sacrificed all kinds of stuff like this: fruits and vegetables, wine, and yes, even animals.

Now, I want to be clear on this. I want to tell you what Old Testament animal sacrifice is not. The living God, the God of Abraham fully revealed in the humble carpenter Jesus Christ, is not bloodthirsty. God is not into getting things dead. That kind of quote-unquote "sacrifice," as in, getting things dead to please an angry God – that is a pagan invention. Sacrifice the pretty lady to keep the gods happy. Church, that's Hollywood movie stuff, not how sacrifice works with the God revealed in Jesus. For us in the Judeo-Christian tradition, sacrifice is about life.

There is this little passage in Leviticus that is very important – Leviticus 17:11. It says this, "the life of a creature is in the blood." You see, Jewish people in the 1st Century, and that includes Jesus and his followers, they saw blood as this mysterious red fluid that literally held life in it. Sacrificing an animal, pouring out this mysterious fluid, was not about

killing, not about getting animals dead. It was about life, about putting life itself on the altar before the Lord. Putting life on the altar was a small act with a big meaning. Sacrifice is a small action with life-sized implications. A little bit of life sacrificed on the altar means my entire life is given to the Lord.

Maybe this will make more sense if we look at it from a couple of different angles. Take the Sabbath for example. God commanded, in the 10 commandments no less, to take sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, and do no work whatsoever. Sacrifice a day, not because God wants you to be lazy; but because a little bit of time sacrificed to the Lord has life-sized implications. It means your entire calendar, the way you schedule your life, belongs to God. I wonder how different my life would be if I scheduled everything, everything according to God's priorities?

Another example: tithing, or sacrificing a tenth of your income. Tithing is the biblical, and historic standard for charitable giving to the church. For centuries, Christians have looked at their paychecks, moved the decimal point over one place, and given that amount to their local congregation. And, for centuries, Presbyterian ministers have been too scared to talk about money at all, let alone tithing. Tithing is a sacrifice, a small action with life-sized implications. Sacrificing one tenth of your income, giving it to the church, means what I call "my" money is really God's money. Every penny I make, save, or spend, every product I purchase, all my stuff belongs to God and is to be used for his purposes.

Sacrifice has a transforming effect, a way of sobering our thoughts. Speaking from experience, sacrificing a tenth of your income will make you rethink what you buy (and not just because you have less disposable income). Tithing makes me rethink why I buy stuff to begin with; and who am I supporting, or what evil systems am I supporting with my patronage? I think this is what Paul was getting at when he told the Romans to present their bodies as living sacrifices. "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Let's face it. We live in a fearful, secularized, shortsighted, materialistic, consumerist, sex-crazed, perpetually anxious, self-absorbed, pagan culture of consumption and accumulation ... just like Christians in the 1st Century. The Bible's words are for us, and they have something to say about worship: do not conform to the pattern of this world, be transformed

by the renewing of your mind, present your bodies as living sacrifices. This is your spiritual worship.

Worship, what we do together on Sunday mornings, is sacrifice, a small physical, sometimes (if the preacher doesn't get longwinded, one-hour) action with life-sized implications. Two examples: Passing the peace with one another isn't just being nice. It's a small action with a big meaning, like, "Stranger, new-comer, I don't know anything about your life or lifestyle but I accept you. I welcome you, and I love you the same way Jesus loves you." Many churches put the passing of the peace after the confession, so that handshake also means, "I forgive you the way Christ forgives you." Then, we keep that forgiveness and acceptance going throughout the week. Passing the peace and hospitality of Christ here has life-sized implications out there in our daily lives.

We confess in our worship services. Everybody sins and messes up, but we (Jesus-following weirdos) come in here on Sunday mornings and admit it. We fess up. Then we do something about it. A sacrifice of confession here means we refuse to live in a world of lies, our own or anybody else's. We choose to live in a world where the grace of God has the last word.

Now, I want to head off my own self here for a second. I know the way my brain works. I'm always looking for a shortcut or a way out. My brain says, "If Sunday morning worship is about sacrifice, and sacrifice is about life-sized implications, then, if I live a good life, then I don't have to go to church." There's a real-time equivalent to this. When I was in high school I thought, I don't have to go to church to worship God. I can worship God anywhere, like on a basketball court, or even better: with my girlfriend at the movies. True! You can worship God anywhere, even on a basketball court or at the movies. But, really, God was the last thing on my mind when I played basketball or spent time with my girlfriend. It's like the difference between what's good and what's best. It's a good thing to worship God on a basketball court. But, it's the best thing to come to worship, make sacrifices with the community of faith, have your life rearranged by God's amazing grace, then go play basketball as a changed, more holy person.

One more thing, and we will conclude with this. Sacrifice does not come natural. Human beings do not like to sacrifice, praise, give thanks, forgive, any of that godly stuff. And at the same time, sacrifice comes real

natural for God. In Jesus Christ, God made the ultimate sacrifice. He became a human being, first of all. He took on human life, taught us what real life looks like, and when the time came around, he gave his lifeblood on the cross: a little act, with a great big meaning. God sacrificed himself, and that has life-sized implications for him. God is 100%, completely in love with and all for us. His life, sacrificial death, and resurrection has won eternal life, the death of death, salvation for us all.

Church, God did not command us to sacrifice foods because he wants us hungry, or to take a Sabbath because he wants us to kill time. God did not command us to give a tenth of our income because he wants us to be poor.

In worship, we make a sacrifice of praise when we sing hymns, but it's not like a concert, just for entertainment. A sacrifice of praise has life-sized implications. Every word that comes out of our mouths in church and out of church, in the locker room, at the water cooler, at high decibels when our family makes us mad, every one of our words has become praise to God.

Sacrificing one day a week is like saying, "Look over here! All you folks are working yourselves to death because you think you'll get somewhere with *your* work. I'm choosing to not do a thing right now, because God is the one who provides for me."

I usually don't like disclaimers but I feel like I need to give one. The whole concept of sacrifice can be lost on us modern day Americans in a couple of ways: like our tastes, and our lifestyle. Maybe you've noticed this: many well-meaning church leaders tone down the Bible's sacrifice and blood imagery. There is a widespread fear that people will be grossed out, offended, or turned off. Blood-talk requires a lot of explaining, otherwise it makes God look weird, and we preachers like it when people actually come back to church. And, when it comes to lifestyle most Americans don't process meat on a daily basis. Chicken sandwiches magically appear, bloodless, in drive-through windows. Plus, our popular, TV, American

culture is about getting more stuff, consumption, accumulation – not giving away. This sacrifice business can be weird, but it is very important.

Don't go with the crowd. Stand out. Make a sacrifice, be a living sacrifice, and have your world rearranged, have your life founded on God's eternal abundance, not your own piddling earthly wealth. Paul also told the Romans to present their bodies as living sacrifices. He called it spiritual worship. This where we get to our topic, finally:

Sacrifice is not about going through the motions. It's about life, dedication, devotion, persistence. SOMETHING ABOUT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, WORSHIP IS RELATIONSHIP, WORSHIP IS RIGHT LIVING

This stuff comes up in scripture all the time, especially in the prophets the prophet quotes God and you can tell God has something to say about worship. God says: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your solemn assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" Isaiah, the great prophet, in his first chapter writes these words for God: "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me... When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen... Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow."

FINISH WITH ROMANS 12 RIGHT LIVING BODY AS SACRIFICE

In Old Testament days, lots of other pagan, religions did that – people would kill an animal, just get something dead, to make their idol happy. It's like that King Kong stuff – kill a virgin to satisfy the Ungabunga god of the mountain.

It's actually the exact opposite: God is about us going around bringing new life to things. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

The closest thing we have to sacrifice these days is when folks like firefighters or servicemen and women make the “quote-unquote” ultimate sacrifice.

The trick is to stop thinking about music style, personal preference, and pleasing everybody; and to start thinking about what worship really is, how to do it well, and what pleases the Lord.

when God has to straighten people out. Hosea

doesn't want blood and death. God wants obedience, he wants his people to live

That's why you get stuff in the psalms like X, where God doesn't want blood – he wants obedience, he wants life. Or in the prophets where God hates worship services because the life isn't being given away.

The Apostle Paul says something extraordinary in that Romans passage we heard just now. “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices... this is your spiritual act of worship.” What we have here is a power-punch, a one-line zinger that sums up a theme that runs through the whole Bible. Worship is all about Sunday morning, here, with the community of faith; and worship never stops (we do it all day every day); and it's about sacrifice.

I have this buddy back home, Scott Bradford. Scott Bradford has never weighed more than 130 pounds, but he started at linebacker on our

middle school football team. He would have played football in high school but he probably would have killed himself. Scott Bradford doesn't care about getting hurt. He doesn't care about getting his clothes dirty. He doesn't care about how insignificant the game may appear to outsiders. You see, when it comes to basketball, football, baseball, tennis, whatever sport it doesn't matter, Scott Bradford commits 100%. I've seen Scott Bradford through a hedgerow after a Nerf football. Scott split his knee wide open diving after a wiffle-ball in the back yard. Scott so loves the game, he is so dedicated to the game, he is so in love with the game, he will sacrifice his body and throw himself headlong into anything in order to make a play. This illustration may not get us there completely, but I think Paul's point is this: throw your life to God. Give God all of it. Take a long running start and hurl yourself into the life of Christ. And, do that with your body. Paul is begging you, I think God is begging US ALL, to commit our bodies 100% to the work of God.

I'm afraid a lot of Christians hear that kind of message today and make the mistake of thinking, "Cool. It's not about what I actually do. It's not about my actions. As long as my heart is right, I can do whatever I." That's not cool at all, and the other direction isn't cool either. People at the time of Jesus took it the other way, they thought, as long as I go through the motions physically, get animals dead, then I'll be okay with God.

Jesus has a way of making you stop and rethink things. A few years ago, I had the privilege of going on a mission trip to the Gulf Coast with a bunch of Michigan college students. We Presbyterians teamed up with the Methodists who in turn got in cahoots with the International Center. So, there were a few non-Christian, Chinese students with us on the trip: great guys. Over the course of the week, I kept hearing our Caucasian, Michigan, Christian students talking about how hard it is to find balance in their lives. There is so much to juggle: school, athletics, social engagements, families, church, extracurricular activities, clubs, you name it. "It's just so hard," they kept saying, "to find 'balance.'" This was something I had been thinking about a lot, struggling with, to be honest: why do we all feel so busy? Are we really busy or is it just in our heads; and what's up with all this trying to find "balance" business? I wanted answers for myself, so, I took a chance. I decided to really challenge myself on what I knew to be

true, and shock the fool out of my students at the same time. One night, during devotions, I told our students something like this: Balance doesn't exist for the Judeo-Christian tradition, that's an Eastern thing. Yin and Yang, Taoism, Buddhism: all that business is about finding "balance." Christianity is about 100%, completely unbalanced, unashamed, all or nothing, total, loyalty, allegiance, dedication. For us, there is no balancing our Christianity with something else. There is only Christ. That's it. Everything else has to go through him if it wants to be in our life. I think I scared the Christians. Like I said, Jesus has a way of making you stop and rethink things.