

1.7.2018 Epiphany 1 (Romans 12:1-5)

On Christmas Day we discussed the importance of seeking objective truth, and how crucial it is to avoid being deceived by our own finite, fallen, and limited human perspective. We established the fact that we must build our lives on the Rock of Absolute Truth, the foundation which is Jesus Christ. We considered His creation and His heavenly perspective by contemplating the 10 million billion billion stars in the known universe, and those magnificent verses found in the Gospel of John that reveal our Lord and our God already “*was*” before the creation of space and time: “*In the beginning was the Word...*” (John 1:1). Finally, by considering all that Jesus gave up at Christmas to be born in a stable, to enter His creation to pursue and to die for us, we concluded that we cannot fathom, nor can we deny, the infinite love of God for His people.

As we gather once again in His house, the inspired words of St. Paul found in our Epistle this morning prove to be an appropriate follow-up to all that we discussed in the season of Christmas. Paul writes, “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service*” (Romans 12:1). Needless to say, St. Paul is correct. After all that God has done for us, after all that He has given up for us, a sensible response is to offer and present unto Him “our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice.” To offer such a “living sacrifice” is to dedicate all that we are, all that we have, and all that we can do to God in humble and grateful remembrance of His amazing grace, His mercies that are new every morning, and His perfect, full, and sufficient sacrifice that saved us all from the punishment that we so justly deserve. Today, let’s consider this idea of presenting ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, and ways that we may begin this reasonable service.

In our culture, the word sacrifice normally suggests a loss of something or giving something up, and while this is certainly part of what Paul is referring to in this passage, it’s not the entirety of his message. In Paul’s day, if a person sacrificed something to God, that person was not only giving up something of great value, they were also dedicating the sacrifice to God for the purpose of drawing near to Him. In the Temple at Jerusalem, the

sacrifices and offerings presented to God were made from valuable, spotless domestic animals or food which took a substantial amount of work to prepare. People would take these valuable offerings, have them placed on the altar before God, and by His mercy they were brought back into a right relationship with Him. So from Paul's perspective, a sacrifice is to take something of your own, of great value, and dedicate it to God for the purpose of drawing closer to Him.

Now consider these inspired words once more: *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service"* (Romans 12:1). St. Paul is exhorting us, in view of God's mercy, to offer in sacrifice everything we are to God, by placing our very life on His altar. As we offer ourselves to Him we recognize a distinct difference between the sacrifice we present, and the sacrifices offered in the Temple at Jerusalem, for we are not dead animals, but living members of His Body. Yet, as we offer ourselves in sacrifice, there is a sense in which we also die: We die to sin, and we die to self, that we may live for Christ. This thought is expressed in a letter Paul wrote to the Galatians. He wrote, *"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20).

We can recognize in that verse the way Paul is describing a living sacrifice. He describes himself as being crucified with Christ, he has been sacrificed, yet he lives, and he lives for Christ - constantly. Not just for an hour on Sunday morning, but all week. Not with just a tenth of his money, but all of it. Not just sacrificing to God that which he feels like offering, but all that he is, all that he has, all that he can do is unconditionally dedicated to God on a daily basis as a living sacrifice. Clearly, Paul heard what Jesus said, *"If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me"* (Luke 9:23). Taking up our cross daily, especially in this comfortable American culture, isn't easy and it doesn't feel good. It will cost us to follow Jesus, but that is the meaning of sacrifice, to take something of your own, of great value, and dedicate it to God, for the purpose of drawing closer to Him.

In order to dedicate our selves, our souls and bodies as *“a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God,”* we will have to resist the temptations of this world. St. Paul, in our Epistle, tells Christians, *“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God”* (Romans 12:2). In this verse, Paul tells us that we can’t have it both ways. We can’t be set apart as holy, living sacrifices to God, and at the same time, model our thoughts and behavior after the ways of this world. Our Lord said it like this, *“No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon”* (Matthew 6:24). Each of us must make this choice: Offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, or give ourselves up to the world. In one of my favorite quotes, C.S. Lewis speaks to the consequence of our decision. He said, "Earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, a region of Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself." So, choose this day whom you will serve, but remember, eternity is only a breath away.

In conclusion, consider once again what God has done, because this is the basis of Paul’s statement, the reason why presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice is our reasonable service as sensible people. Our Lord, who ruled the universe that He created from His throne in glory, who reigned in majesty so far beyond anything we can imagine, entered His creation, so humbly, as a babe born in a stable. The Son of God came to earth in the flesh, *“that the world through Him might be saved”* (John 3:17). He manifested His sacrificial love for mankind in the most brutal way possible, on a Cross at Calvary. We’ve heard the truth of what God has done for us. We’ve read Paul’s inspired words that describe a reasonable response. Now consider the way that God has honored and loved you by allowing you, His creation, to choose whether or not you want to respond to His love. You get to choose. The choice is either Him or the world.

None of us can begin to imagine the price that the Son of God paid for our redemption, yet He forces His gift of love on no one. The thought that He would allow us to reject Him, the God of the Universe, makes me wonder what hurts more: Suffering and dying for the ones you love, or seeing so many who go about their business like they couldn’t care less. May we who

have heard the Truth be those who respond to the Good News that God has declared through the blood of His Son, and may it be our daily endeavor to present our selves, our souls and bodies, as *“a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”*