

LIVING AS SACRIFICES

JEREMIAH 15: 15-21

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ROMANS 12:9-21

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PAUL LOVED A GOOD ARGUMENT.

And believe you me; his letter to the Romans contains a good argument. It is also a very long and at times convoluted argument. It begins shortly after his greeting to the Christians in Rome and continues through the end of Chapter 11.

His argument can be summarized this way: Paul was sent by God to bring good news to the Gentiles. That good news has the power to save the entire world from sin and its principal effects-corruption and death. Who needs to be saved from sin and death? Everyone. The Jew, the Non-Jew, those who have the Torah, those who don't, the young, the old, men and women, in fact all of Creation. Paul sees all of God's creation in a state of rebellion against their Creator.

God has acted to end our rebellion. He did not end it by sending legions of angels to destroy us, as He might well have done. No, in His graciousness, God sent His Son to end the rebellion. By perfectly conforming his will to God's will, Jesus has surrendered on behalf of all human kind ending the rebellion. Jesus also absorbed into himself all the consequences of human rebellion. This is what Jesus did on the cross. He sacrificed himself on our behalf. When God raised Jesus from the dead, He accepted Jesus' sacrifice for us. The cross reveals to us how costly it was for God to reconcile the world to Himself without using force, or to put a finer point on it, by using only the force of love.

PAUL HAS NOW REACHED THE TURNING POINT IN HIS LETTER TO THE CHRISTIANS IN ROME.

He has laid out his theological argument. Now it's time for what the Rev. Mr. Bob Hoffman, of happy memory, liked to call the great "So what?" So what does this mean for you and me? Do we just say, "Thank you,

Jesus!” and go on living our lives as usual? By no means! Paul tells us that God’s sacrifice, Christ’s sacrifice, must be answered by our sacrifice. In a sense we are called to implement the effects of that sacrifice.

“I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your selves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Paul calls all of us who have benefited from the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to respond by living sacrificial lives.

PAUL WAS NOT A MAN TO LEAVE THINGS TO OUR IMAGINATION.

He went on to give some examples of what he meant by “offer up your bodies as living sacrifices...” Remember that a sacrifice costs something. In ancient Israel one might purchase a lamb or a goat to offer as a sacrifice. These cost the one offering the sacrifice a great deal of money. Of course, it cost the lamb or goat much more. Perhaps that’s why Paul is enamored of “living sacrifices”. Still costly, but not usually death-dealing.

The first thing Paul thinks of when he thinks of living sacrifices is what he calls in this letter “genuine love”. The word is actually “un-hypocritical love”. He gives some examples; **this kind of love:**

- Abhors evil and clings to good.
- Is affectionate and seeks to out-do the other in giving honor.
- Is diligent...it actively looks for concrete ways to express love.
- It rejoices in hope; it perseveres in affliction, it is devoted in prayer. **Prayer as an expression of love...think about that for a minute.**
- It contributes to the needs of the saints.
- It pursues hospitality

I think we need to unpack this last one a bit. How exactly does one pursue hospitality? Paul seems to mean more than just offering a Christian counterpart of “Welcome to Moe’s!”. He even seems to mean more than offering a meal and a place to stay.

One commentator wrote that **the doctrine** by which the church stands or falls is “Justification by grace

through faith.” He went on to say that **the practice** by which the church stands or falls is hospitality.

He then went on to elaborate:

- Hospitality **as charity** offers crumbs from the table.

BUT

- Hospitality **as justice** offers a place at the table.

- He believes that what Paul means by pursuing hospitality is to work to make sure that everyone has a place at the table. That is to say, to work for a society in which everyone has a chance to earn a decent living. To work for a society in which everyone has the opportunity to pursue a full life.

Insuring equal opportunity is thus un-

hypocritical love. This is some of what Paul means by sacrificial living, living that costs us something.

PAUL THEN GOES ON TO SPEAK ABOUT THE WAY THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY SHOULD LIVE AMID A POSSIBLE HOSTILE WORLD.

Here we clearly hear the voice of Jesus coming through the mouth of Paul. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Now this does not mean we say "Well bless your heart." For I have it on the best authority that this Southern expression actually means that the person you are addressing is an idiot. Paul goes on to urge us to rejoice with those who are happy and weep with those who are sad. This is true empathy and it is a powerful way of "loving the enemy as well as the neighbor."

Paul demands that Christians to be peacemakers. By this he means refusing to exact revenge, refusing to give pay-back. Leave that to God, he urges Christians.

PAUL IS URGING CHRISTIANS TO ACT DIFFERENTLY.

In the name of God, as a logical consequence of God's gracious act towards the world, Christians are to model for and offer to the world an alternative way of living: a gracious way of living. In a sense we are to create an alternative community, practicing genuine love wedded to a peace ethic, and then we are to invite people into it. This community will be shaped by God's grace and not by the wisdom and ways of the world. The more people we invite into this community, the more powerful and pervasive will be its influence. But Paul is clear: this is the community into which we invite people. The message we are to send out is "This is who we are and how we live; come join us."

We do not offer entertainment. We do not promise success as the world defines success. We do not offer a charmed life, magically protected from the chances and changes of the human struggle. And no, we do not offer sandwiches and beer after the service.

What we offer is a community struggling by the grace of God to live as God's children in a troubled world. What we offer is therefore the cross which Jesus offered. We call people to live sacrificially in the great cause of the one who sacrificed his very life.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton once wrote, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."

In his letter to the Romans Paul has sent us an invitation to try Christianity. God and all His creation await our R.S.V.P.