

Sermon: Present your bodies as a sacrifice

Romans 12:1-8

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Our worship service here is marked by much listening to the Bible. We read from the Old Testament, A Psalm, New Testament, the Gospels. And there a divine logic to this - we need the Words of God.

Our church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and his 12 apostles; so when they speak, we listen. Carefully. What they say is not optional for us - it is our lifeline to knowing God and to being reconciled with God. There is no life with God without Jesus Christ and his apostles and what they taught us.

1 Do not think you are better than others

So when St Paul writes: "I say to everyone among you", as he does in Romans 12:3, we have to listen carefully.

Surely, he wrote this to the congregation in Rome, 1950 years ago, but if something was important for all Christians in those days - it is probably important for us as well.

Paul says to all of us, 'not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment'. Paul speaks here of the virtue of humility. Lack of this foundational virtue causes many problems

We may be perfect preachers, good teachers, mighty managers, amazing accountants, but if we are not able to look at others with respect, we undermine our service to God.

Paul wrote this to the believers in Rome because there, in church, people from different cultural backgrounds, Jews and gentiles, looked down on each other.

The Jewish Christians thought the gentile Christians were not strict enough in their lifestyle, they did not live by all the laws of the Old Testament. They were not puritans, to say it in more contemporary language.

The gentiles laughed about those legalistic Jews, and claimed that they understood the grace of God better than those Jews did.

And this attitude of not accepting each other, is a killer in church. The idea that I am better than the other; the lie that I know best; the idea that one group is better than another group.

Diversity, not uniformity, is the mark of God's work. It is true in nature, it is true among humans in this world; it is also true in the community of the Church. We are men and women, teenagers, kids, with the most diverse backgrounds, temperament, abilities and gifts. And God brings all those together into one body - united by Jesus Christ.

There is no higher or lower, there is no more or less important in church. We are all members of the same body, we all need each other; and we need to serve each other humbly.

if others are different than you are, it is because God gave them other gifts, he made them differently, he developed them as they are. You do what you are good at, and do it with a cheerful

heart, is the advice, yes the command of the apostle. And do not think that you are better than others.

To not think too high of yourself does not mean that you should feel low or bad or dumb. There are many Christians, men and women, with a very negative view of themselves; people who always think they are not useful, not good enough, not so bright as others, not interesting.

That is not an attitude the our Lord Jesus and his apostles support. Our Lord has a very high view of each and every person, and also of you. You personally are loved by God. He accepts you as you are. So you have no reason to look down on ourselves.

But God accepts your neighbour in church, the others here, just as much as he accepts you - so none of us has a reason to look down on others.

There is no space for pride, or arrogance, in the House of God. That attitude is even called idolatry in the Bible. Samuel the prophet in the Old Testament speaks to Saul, the proud king, 'behold, to obey is better than sacrifice - for rebellion is as the sin of divination and presumption - that is, pride, or arrogance - is as iniquity and idolatry.

For God, we commit idolatry if we think we are better than others. It is the worship of ourselves, is it not?

2 You are a sacrifice

That is why Paul begins this passage that we have read by saying: present your bodies, yourself, as a sacrifice to God. And that is excellent medicine against pride.

Why should we make ourselves available to God as a sacrifice? Because of the mercies of God, Paul says. The most compelling motivation for humble, faithful, obedient living for God with respect for all people should not be the threat of discipline, or the judgment of God. Our living for him is the result of overflowing and unceasing gratitude for the mercies of God.

[What are some of the mercies of God that you experience?]

Mercy means undeserved goodness. We get so much from God - without deserving it. So we present our bodies as a sacrifice to God and we do not look down on others who also receive Gods mercy.

The word Paul uses for present your bodies, "present", was in often used in the Greek Old Testament that was used by most Jews in those days, as a technical term. It was the word for a priest placing an offering on the altar in the temple.

Our lives must be a living and a holy sacrifice to God. What does this mean, a 'living' and 'holy' sacrifice? St Origen, one of our church fathers from the third century, wrote about this in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans:

"Paul says that the sacrifice is living because it has eternal life in it, which is Christ. Elsewhere he says, 'we always carry in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.' He calls it holy because the Holy Spirit dwells in it, as he says elsewhere, 'do you not know that you are Gods temple and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?'

God is not interested in dead animal sacrifices, the best sacrifice for God is you. Because Christ lives in you, and the Holy Spirit lives in you. By sacrificing our lives to God, we actually follow in the footsteps of God himself - who through Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for our sake. Amazing mercy.

One example of a person who sacrificed his life for God was the 19th century English missionary David Livingstone. He gave his life for bringing the gospel to Central Africa. He wrote in his diary in the 1850s:

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in heartfelt activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind and bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? [...] It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege.

This was very humble of Livingstone, but I still like to call what he did a real example of sacrificing your life for God. He did not value his own life higher than that of others. He lived for the sake of other people; he made himself and his own needs and desires less important.

If we give our lives to God, pride disappears and other people become more important. But this does not happen easily or automatically.

Paul writes to Christians in Rome. And to those he says: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers [...] to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. To Christians he says: 'do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.'

This means that for us Christians, it is possible that our lives are not sacrificed to God, and that we proudly think we are better than others.

We all have to learn much. We have not arrived yet. Therefore as Christians we must hear this message again and again, and each day we should make sure that we present ourselves to live for God.

That is our true worship, Paul says.

We come to church to worship God; for an hour or a bit more we pray, listen to the word of God, we kneel, we worship God as we commune with him... That is the heart of our whole life of worship.

This one hour a week is the place where our batteries are loaded for living for God the other 167 hours per week. And the value of your worship today is defined by how you present yourself to God to serve him the other 6 days of the week.

That is how God wants to be worshiped. Worship cannot be separated from actual obedience to God that expresses itself in serving other people instead of thinking that we are better than others.

3 Whole existence sacrifice - including the mind - that changes us

But how do we sacrifice our lives to God? Paul says that we must allow God to change our minds so that our behaviour changes.

Do not let the societies in which we live squeeze you into its own mould. That is so easy - if we do nothing about it, this automatically happens. At every moment of our life we inhale the images, ideas, the feelings of the world we live in, and if we do nothing, we will not only inhale this general attitude of mankind, but we also exhale it.

The sacrifice God wants from us is our transformation, and this only comes through new thinking. We must not be conformed to this world but transformed. And this change begins with our mind.

We can only worship God with our lives if our minds are renewed. That is a slow process. We make a few steps forward, and then we do a step back again. We gain some, we lose some. But throughout our life, we are in a process of change towards God.

How is our mind renewed? Listen to these wise words of church father St Origen who I already quoted:

Our mind is renewed by the practice of wisdom and reflection on the Word of God and the spiritual understanding of his law. The more one reads the Scriptures daily and the greater one's understanding is, the more one is renewed always and every day. I doubt whether a mind which is lazy toward the holy Scriptures and the exercise of spiritual knowledge can be renewed at all.

So, Origen says, our minds must be drenched in the Word of God for the mind to be renewed - and I think he is right. But he also speaks of spiritual knowledge, and he means the wise interpretation and application of the Bible.

It is not mechanically knowing the words of the bible that makes us true servants of God. It is also related to the work of the Holy Spirit who helps us to understand those Bible words and who leads us in interpreting those words in a manner that is consistent with our own time and situation.

This wisdom is found, I believe, in the first place inside the community of the church. That is where God gives us us the wisdom we need. Here we listen to how God revealed himself in his word and how this has been understood throughout the ages.

Together we learn how to serve God, how to live in our days, how to respect each other without thinking we are better. How to not be proud but respect all other people.

That is very important for strengthening the community of church - and this is why Paul wrote this letter.

conclusion

So concluding, what to do with this personally? How can we present ourselves as a sacrifice to God? Three

1. Look at your agenda and ask yourself whether the things you do, are pleasing him and good for other people. What do you actually do for the sake other people?
2. And let us look regularly at our attitudes. Do we respect all people here in church and in our other communities? Or do we think we are better and we know better? That idea, "I am number One" may be the self-assertion that society has taught us, but it is destructive for society and for the community of the church.

3. The way to progress in the renewal of our minds, to have an attitude that really pleases God, is to listen much to the Word of God, and to obey it. Make sure that in your agenda in the season ahead of us, you have time for prayer and study of the Bible.

That changes your mind, that changes your life, that makes you the living and holy sacrifice to God that pleases him.

Amen.