

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Stewardship of the blessings God gives us includes participating in the work of the church with firstfruit offerings that are proportionate and . . . sacrificial. Today, we’re going to talk about sacrifice.

You may think, “Sacrifice”? What do you mean, “Sacrifice”?!

Well to answer your question: one, Sacrifice is giving that makes a difference. Two, Sacrifice is a free act of love. Three, Sacrifice is an expression of faith in God.

I.

I wonder what Isaac was thinking as he talked with his father on the way to the mountain. You know... the mountain where Abraham was to offer his only son as a sacrifice.

The conversation might have sounded like this...

“Father?”

“Yes, son.”

“I’m carrying the wood, and you’re carrying the fire.”

“Yes, son.”

“But... Father? Where’s the sacrifice?”

After a pause, Abraham replied, “God will provide the sacrifice.”

I don’t know how Abraham explained what this meant or exactly what Abraham expected, but he knew God had already provided the sacrifice.

We don’t worship with that kind of sacrifice today. But we still need to consider this question: How do I get on the sacrificial altar?

Let me illustrate...

Bring out the offering plate (don’t show the inside to the church); set it down.

Think big! Think first about how sacrifice is giving that makes a difference. Paul writes in our text, “They gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means” (v 3).

Sometimes when people think about their giving, they want to know, “Well, how much will it take?” It takes a lot. It takes enough to make a difference. But here is the key question:

What difference does it make to me?

Does my faith make any difference in my life? Does the amount I give make any difference in my lifestyle? If I still have enough left that my giving makes no difference to me, then it doesn't make much difference.

How much would it take to fill this plate. How much would it take to make a difference?

And remember, the crucial question is this: How much would it take to make a difference to me, the giver?

Here's how this offering plate is filled . . . and here's how this make a difference to me, the giver.

Step inside the offering plate.

II.

So, what do we mean by "sacrifice"? Next let's think about how sacrifice is a free act of love.

Paul writes, "Of their own accord . . . they gave themselves first to the Lord" (v 3-5).

Why is it that we take time for offering during the worship service and not just do it as we go out the door? It's because, as Paul says, it is an act of worship, like kneeling or bowing.

Often actions speak louder than words. For example what do your actions say about your relationships. When we marry the one we most love, we take action by giving him or her not just our possessions, but our very selves. Our self is priceless, but we give ourselves freely, out of love, to our spouse and to our children.

God loves us even more than we can love one another. He has given us all we have. Sacrificial giving is giving our whole lives. This means our giving is no longer giving "away" but using all we have for what we do, which is living for God. So, real sacrifice is done willingly.

How did I get into this offering plate? No one picked me up and put me in. I got in by myself. Paul says the Macedonians in our text, gave "of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part" (v 3-4) in the offering.

Think of the ways we tend to use our money. It's human nature to ask, "How little can I pay for what I need?" and also, "How much can I spend on what I want?" How many of you will spend on snacks or drinks without thinking about it? But when it comes time to buy groceries and essentials you cut coupons, compare prices, and make certain

that you are getting the best bang for your buck. Advertisers know this, and they play with the emotions of what you want, regardless of your actual need, because they know we spend freely on what we want.

Similarly, everyone needs God. It's a fact. But not everyone wants God. Unfortunately needing God doesn't fill the church. Likewise, we all need to give offerings in worship, not because God needs them but for the needs of our own spiritual life. However, I give sacrificially only when I want to, and I do want to give, because I want the things to happen that God will do through my giving.

Sacrifice is not for the sake of getting. Paul writes that the Macedonians were "taking part in the relief of the saints." (v 4) They cared about others. It was famine relief.

So, why do I get into the offering plate? Some would say, "doesn't God promise that if we give, he'll give more to us?"

Not exactly. It's the other way around. I sacrifice not because of what I get but because of what I already have. And I have the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

III.

What do we mean by "sacrifice"? Finally, let's think about how sacrifice is an expression of faith in God.

Our text says: "For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means."

There was famine in Palestine. But, in Macedonia, there was also hard economic times. So, how could they give anything?

God obviously gave them more. As Jesus said in Matthew 6: Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (v 31-33)

I put myself into the offering plate to meet others' needs. But when is it time to get out of the offering plate to meet my own needs?

The answer, is that God delivers to me *right here* everything I need.

Paul writes: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written,

“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” (2 Cor 9:8-9)

When Abraham answered Isaac by saying, “God himself will provide.” He knew God would do his part. And sure enough, God provided a ram that had gotten hung up in a bush. This ram, which was a male lamb, was substituted for Isaac and saved his life. This, of course, is a picture of Jesus, the Lamb who was sacrificed as a substitute to save our lives.

Conclusion.

Ultimately, the only way to understand what sacrifice is, is to look to the sacrifice of Jesus. Paul writes that the Macedonians did what they did “by the will of God” (8:5). God’s word makes it clear to us that “Thy will be done” is for “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

Why do I climb into the offering plate?

Step out of the plate and stand it up so that the cross in the bottom shows.

This is where Jesus is. Jesus is the real sacrifice.

And if Jesus is the real sacrifice, then why do we sacrifice? Because we are with the Jesus, who says, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

What does it mean to sacrifice?

One. Sacrifice is giving that makes a difference to us. It is Jesus’ sacrifice that makes all the difference for us and makes a difference in us.

Two. Sacrifice is a free act of love. Jesus was taunted to come down from the cross, but love held him there. Sacrifice is not for the sake of getting but for the sake of others. Jesus’ sacrifice was for unworthy sinners who are still rebellious.

Three. Sacrifice is an expression of faith in God. Jesus expressed confidence in his Father when he said, “Into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Lk 23:46).

This is why we get into the offering plate. Getting into giving according to our means and beyond, of our own accord. We beg earnestly for the favor of taking part, and not as some would expect, but giving ourselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to others.

May God grant that this is true for each of us. Amen.

“Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Heb 13:20-21)
