

Bible Study Romans 12

12:1 “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

Sacrifices were a central feature of religion in the ancient world. This was true of both the pagans and the Jews. The belief was that the favor of the gods and goddesses could be won by offering proper offerings to them. In 1st century Rome, to which Paul was writing this epistle, sacrifice was everywhere. It usually involved animals, but could also involve humans. Pagan sacrifices were a bloody business.

God commanded the ancient Israelites to practice sacrifice. Below is a chart of the prescribed Hebrew sacrifices. They do not include human sacrifices.

OLD TESTAMENT SACRIFICES		
SACRIFICE	ELEMENTS	PURPOSE
Burnt Offering	Bull, Ram, male bird (dove or young pigeon for the poor)	VOLUNTARY Act of worship ; atonement for unintentional sin in general. Expression of devotion, commitment and complete surrender
Grain Offering	Grain, Fine flour, olive oil, incense, baked breads, SALT , NO YEAST . This accompanies burnt offering and fellowship offering along with drink offering	VOLUNTARY Act of worship ; recognition of God's provision; devotion to God.
Fellowship Offering (Peace Offering)	ANY animal without defect from herd of flock	VOLUNTARY Act of Worship ; thanksgiving and fellowship, included a communal meal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thank Offering for an unexpected blessing ▪ Votive Offering for deliverance from a vow ▪ Free Will offering express general gratitude
Sin Offering	1. Young bull for high priest 2. Male goat for leader 3. Female goat or lamb from common person 4. Dove or pigeon for the poor 5. Tenth an Ephah of fine flour for the very poor	MANDATORY Atonement for specific unintentional sin; confession of sin; forgiveness of sin; cleansing of defilement
Guilt Offering	Ram of Lamb	MANDATORY Atonement for unintentional sin requiring restitution; cleansing from defilement; make restitution, pay 20% fine.

All these sacrifices were commanded in the Mosaic books of the Old Testament, mostly in the book of Leviticus. All these sacrifices were required, but the most important Hebrew sacrifice was the Passover. This sacrifice was established at the same time that the Israelites were released from slavery in Egypt and began their journey to the Promised Land.

God gave specific instruction how this sacrifice was to be performed:

“Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, “This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you. Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: ‘On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household... Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats. Now you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month. Then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight. And they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it... And thus you shall eat it: with a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. So you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD’s Passover... ‘So this day shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance (Exodus 12:1-11, 14).

Observant Jews celebrate the Passover to this day, although in a modified form. Every Passover is a reenactment of the first Passover. In a very real way each annual Passover is also a re-participation in the that first Passover sacrifice of a perfect male lamb thousands of years ago, which led to their survival and release from slavery.

<https://youtu.be/tTyDhMbfoXQ?si=dLxq8RicnrlZsto MoS>

The New Testament describes how these sacrifices relate to Christians. The first and most obvious point is the Christ is the fulfillment of the Passover. When John the Baptist announced the coming of Christ, he said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:30). Every Jew hearing these words would have instantly thought of the Passover lamb. Paul was even more direct in associating Christ with the Passover lamb: “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast...” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

We have seen that observant Jews re-enact and re-experience the sacrifice of the Passover lamb each time they celebrate Passover. In the first Passover, it was by literally eating the flesh of that sacrificed lamb that they were spared from the death angel, and led to their salvation from slavery. For Orthodox Christians, by worshiping in the Divine Liturgy and partaking of Holy Communion, we not only re-enact and re-experience the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, it is actually made present. The 2,000 years between that event and now disappears. The Liturgy is full of references to a very real present sacrifice:

“You have granted us, Your humble and unworthy servants, to stand even at this hour before the glory of Your holy altar of sacrifice, and to offer to You due worship and praise.”

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“... that You, having regarded our prayer, may cleanse our souls and bodies from every defilement of flesh and spirit; and grant to us to stand before Your holy altar of sacrifice, free of guilt and condemnation.”

It is vital to understand that the offering of sacrifice is not just the work of the priests on behalf of the people. It is also the work of the people themselves as they praise and give thanks.

“Lord God Almighty, You alone are holy. You accept the sacrifice of praise from those who call upon You with their whole heart. Even so accept from us sinners our supplication, and bring it to Your holy altar of sacrifice. Enable us to offer You gifts and spiritual sacrifices for our own sins, and the failings of Your people. Deem us worthy to find grace in Your sight, that our sacrifice may be well-pleasing to You, and that the good Spirit of Your grace may rest upon us and upon these Gifts presented, and upon all Your people.”

This truth is too often overlooked in Orthodoxy. The word “liturgy” in Greek (λειτουργία) means “the work of the people.” In the Old Testament, God said this about the nation which He called: “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel” (Exodus 19:5-6). In the New Testament, Peter quoted this verse and applied it to the Church as a whole: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;” (1 Peter 2:9-12). In both ancient Israel and the Church, God appointed priests to offer the sacrifices, but when Israel then, and the Church now, gather for worship and praise, the laity as a whole have a vital priestly function.

Romans 12:1 specifies what kind of sacrifice God wants from Christians:

12:1 “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

Most of the pagan and Jewish sacrifices required the death of a sacrificed animal. But in Christianity, God wants us to be voluntary, living sacrifices. The old era of blood shedding is now over. The only necessary blood sacrifice has already been made.

“For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:13-14)

“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4).

This new paradigm is reflected in our liturgy:

“You, as the Master of all, became our High Priest, and delivered unto us the sacred service of this liturgical sacrifice without the shedding of blood.”

“We give thanks You, O Lord God of hosts, who has made us worthy to stand even now before Your holy altar of sacrifice, and to fall down before You, seeking Your compassion for our sins and those committed in ignorance by the people. Accept, O God, our supplication. Make us worthy to offer You prayers, supplications, and bloodless sacrifices for all Your people.”

Even in Old Testament times, the slaughter of animals was not the most important sacrifice. Psalm 51 says, *“For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart— these, O God, You will not despise”* (verses 16-17). Even then, God preferred a repentant heart. This repentant heart is a part of what it means for us to be a “living sacrifice.”

Paul’s epistles often emphasize theology the first part, and emphasize the living out that theology in the second part. That pattern is true in Romans, and the second part begins here. These are the ways we must live out our new calling as living sacrifices. Part of being a “living sacrifice” is to submit to undergoing transformation.

“² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

We Orthodox call this transformation “deification.” It is not optional. It is the *“perfect will of God.”*

Another part of being a living sacrifice is to be humble: ***“³ For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith”... “¹⁴ Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.”***

Another part of being a living sacrifice is to use the gifts God has given to us for the strengthening of the Church. These verses presume that we all have spiritual gifts: ***“⁴ For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶ Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; ⁷ or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; ⁸ he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.”***

Another part of being a living sacrifice is to love others sincerely: ***“⁹ Let love be without hypocrisy.”*** No passive aggressiveness or, as we Southerners say, “Bless her heart.”

Another part of being a living sacrifice is avoiding the corruption of the world around us: *“Abhor what is evil. **Cling to what is good.**”* The book of James says, *“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world”* (1:27).

Here follows another series of traits that indicate a person’s transformation into a living sacrifice: *“¹⁰ Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ¹¹ not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; ¹³ distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.”* It is important to note that all these actions are contrary to the sinful part of our human nature. Our remaining spiritual sickness does not want to be *“kindly affectionate to one another”* or *“giving preference to one another”* etc.

The essence of being a true living sacrifice is to be in true subjection to God. The sacrificee must submit to the Sacrificer. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. *“Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood”* (v. 9). God was not only testing the faith of Abraham, but also of Isaac. Abraham was very old, and Isaac was young, stronger and faster. He could have easily escaped, but he allowed his father to bind him and place him on the altar.

Christ also submitted to the Father to become the universal sacrifice. The prophet Isaiah foretold of Him: *“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth”* (Isaiah 53:7, also quoted in Acts 8:32).

Another part of being a living sacrifice is to renounce retribution.

“¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹ Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord”... “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”

Paul is alluding to Christ’s teaching on this topic: *“If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two”* (Matthew 5:40-41). Christ did this on the Cross: *“Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”* (Luke 23:34). St. Stephen, the first martyr of the Church followed Christ’s example: *“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep”* (Acts 7:59-60).

The chapter ends with a summary of the life’s task of every Christian: *“²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

