

ROMANS 12: LOVING SACRIFICE AND SINCERE COMMITMENT

MARK 12:38-44 // ROMANS 12:1-3, 9-16 // ROMANS 13:8-12

Today we continue our series in the book of Romans as we move into Chapters 12 and 13. Throughout these two chapters, Paul shifts from the deep theological foundations of the faith that he set forth in the first eleven chapters to the practical guidelines for living out our Christian walk. Today, as we are gathered together on Thank Offering Sunday, I will focus on the loving sacrifice and sincere commitment that God calls each of us to in our daily walk with Him. We are to be a thank offering in how we live alongside those God brings into our life.

In our Gospel text from Mark 12, Jesus calls out the Pharisee's who "devour widows' houses." This devouring took place when they would make many of the less fortunate, including this population of widows, feel as though they should bring tithes and offerings to the synagogues that far exceeded what any of them could afford. In this passage, Jesus is observing the offerings as they are being taken at the temple and makes note of the widow who put in EVERYTHING she had - EVERYTHING. As Jesus points out to the disciples, she gave more than all the others – she sacrificed ALL she had.

And here in Romans 12, Paul follows onto Jesus' teachings by urging all of us, as disciples, to be ALL IN. We are called to loving sacrifice and sincere commitment. Paul asks us to "*offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God*" as a spiritual act of worship. Like the poor widow, we are asked to give EVERYTHING we have physically, emotionally and spiritually in loving response to our Lord. We are to be sincerely committed to applying His teachings and His ways to our lives each day.

One of my favorite movies is Amazing Grace – the story of William Wilberforce. Debi and I were blessed to travel to the UK for our anniversary early in our marriage. We began our trip to London and then headed out to Bath which is 115 miles directly west of London. This is the location where much of Amazing Grace was filmed years later. During our visit we learned much about Wilberforce and his life's calling to end the horrendous practice of the slave trade in England. The movie when it came out brought to life much of what we had learned during our travels to London and Bath.

A few years after the movie came out, a close friend who had been discipling into my life shared a book by Os Guinness, entitled *The Call*. In the book, Os Guinness defines calling as, "the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service."ⁱ He goes on to point out that "our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to Him, and for Him." And our secondary calling, when we consider God sovereignty over our lives is "that everyone, everywhere, and in everything should think, speak, live, and act entirely for Him [God alone]."ⁱⁱ

This is exactly what Romans 12 and 13 is bringing forth to us in the Scriptures outlined. Out of love for God, we must offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Looking on our own lives with sober judgement and exploring the gifts God has given us to put them to good use for the service of others and in worship to Him. What I love about the example shown in Wilberforce's life is that he took the "spiritual" calling on his life and put it to good use in the "secular" world to which God had called him.

God called him to champion the freedom of those held in bondage. He was to lead the charge to end slavery in the UK. When he first came to faith at the age of 25, he started to believe that the Lord was calling him to leave his secular calling serving in the British Parliament and become a minister to fight this just cause from the pulpit. However, his friend, and fellow Christian, John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, walked alongside him. And in their time together as disciples, Newton spoke into Wilberforce's life to remind him the Lord had called him to lead the cause for the good of the nation in the role he had been given and ordained by God to fulfill.

Wilberforce became a living example for each of us to see all that Romans 12 and 13 encompass. Through Wilberforce, we can see that: we must live sacrificially; we must discern the gifts God has given us, we must serve the Lord with fervor, we must love without boundaries, we must be faithful and sincere in our calling, we must recognize God's ordained role of authorities in government, and we must love others in full recognition of the debt we have to Christ for his grace and mercy on our own lives. Wilberforce wrote in his journal in 1788, "my walk is a public one. My business is in the world, and I must mix in the assemblies of men, or quit the post which God's Providence seems to have assigned me."ⁱⁱⁱ We see in his lifelong example – loving sacrifice and sincere commitment!

So I ask you, "In what ways, can we joyfully give ourselves as 'living sacrifices' to follow Christ and show others He is at work in our lives?" How can we "offer our bodies" as "spiritual acts of worship" in what God has providentially assigned us to do in our everyday living? How can our sacrificial service in response to God be a bold witness to others?

We don't need to take on a monumental task like ending slavery. But how might God use us in the life of one other person or towards a small group of people to share His good news and see the power of His Word at work in our lives. We see this at St. Timothy's already in many areas where God has given us to serve and walk alongside others – City Team, The Village House, Walk for Water, and on the Mexico Mission Trip.

Paul reminds us in Romans 12:6-8, "*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.*"

We must be intentional about understanding and allowing God to reveal the gifts he wants to put to good use in our lives. Paul reiterates to us that all our spiritual gifts, natural abilities and talents are given by God's grace and with His intentionality for the benefit of those around us in need and for the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Christ in building up His church. We do all of this within the calling, vocation, or roles He has given us – parents, spouses, co-workers, students, and disciple-makers.

The week before last at a Discipleship Conference, a young man in his early thirties, a millennial, a Gen-Y'er shared why he listened to a caring, older gentleman from the Baby Boomer generation who began to encourage, teach, and speak truth into his life over the past 6 years. He said the man was willing to share his scars before he shared his Scripture... let me share that one more time... He was willing to share his scars before he shared his Scripture.

The older man demonstrated that his love was sincere, that he was devoted in brotherly love to the younger man to make a difference in his life. He showed he was willing to be open and transparent by sharing the blessings, the hopes, the afflictions, and the battles he experienced in life. He showed respect and honor when considering the younger man's challenges in life. The older man lifted up the needs of the younger man in prayer.

Together, they rejoiced, they mourned and they simply shared life. The two joined one another in God's Word for the "renewing of their minds" and to be "transformed" and aligned to God's perfect will for their lives. This young man now pays it forward, again and again, with other young men in his life.

How can we be faithful and seek ways to serve others with the gifts Christ has given us? In what ways can we be thankful for those with differing gifts, encourage each other's abilities, and seek ways to leverage and complement one another's gifts as we come alongside one another in our homes, in our workplaces, in our schools, and in our church – here at St. Timothy's?

In Romans 13, Paul exhorts each of us to a profound love for one another. He gives us a radical command to engage others with a profound commitment to share our love for Christ and His love for them. We should see ourselves as spiritual debtors. Because of God's grace shown to us, we should feel indebted to share that grace with everyone God brings into our path.

Paul reminds us that the Law is fulfilled completely by loving our neighbors. In the Ten Commandments, we see two ways in which we become separated in loving relationship. The first commandments focus on our vertical relationship with God, our upward calling to live a life that honors Him with all our hearts, all our soul, and all our minds. The remaining commandments point to the things that can cause divisiveness in our horizontal, human relationships.

We live in a cold and uncaring world that many times turns its back on those in need. Imagine how lives could be changed and transformed if we acted with a sense of urgency in loving others unconditionally. The Greek text that is translated “neighbors” can be better defined as “others of a different nature or background.” If we enlarged our definition of neighbor to include anyone the Lord prompts us to engage as we cross paths in life, how would that change our actions towards others?

Paul exhorts us to “wake up” from our slumber in the present time. He uses the word “kairos” to emphasize the critical nature of seeing our time on earth as “the right, critical, or opportune moment” to engage others more fully. Paul calls us to wake up from our spiritual lethargy. As we see the day of Christ being imminent, we should love our neighbors while we have the opportunity to do so. Sometimes we consider the day of Christ as only reflecting His second coming, but it can also mean the time of judgement each of us will face upon our earthly death. Each funeral and loss of life is a reminder that NOW is the time to love our neighbors as Christ has loved us.

Paul tells us very simply how to begin living and loving in this way. First, we must put off our pursuit of sinful and selfish pleasures that can be seen as “deeds of darkness.” In other words, any sinful behavior that we would want to keep hidden from others and in the dark, we need to stop and turn from that sin. Second, we must clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. We must surrender our lives fully and completely to His Lordship. In what ways can we put off the deeds of darkness and put on, or be clothed, in Christ in all we do?

Galatians 3:27 tells us “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” When we get up each morning, we should turn immediately to Him in prayer. We should ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit and the courage to reflect Jesus in all we do. We should pray fervently for God to bring at least one person into our lives each and every day that we can serve and love as He calls us to do. 1 John 4:19 gives us a clear understanding of what motivates us and considerable clarity in the source of our love – put simply “We love because he first loved us.” God’s sacrifice of His Son for us, His love washing over us in unending grace and mercy – this alone should make us indebted to showing love to the world in every way possible, on every day possible.

So as we leave here today, may we go out into the world with a sense of urgency – as loving sacrifice and with sincere commitment to make a difference in the lives of others, to simply love them and share Christ with them.

ⁱ Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Thomas Nelson, 2003), 29

ⁱⁱ Ibid. 30

ⁱⁱⁱ Kevin Belmonte, *Hero for Humanity*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 96.