

# Sorting Out The Sacrifices

*A sermon on Romans 12:1-8 & Matthew 16:13-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 27 August 2017*

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## Message

Recognising what sort of sacrifices we are called to make and what sort of sacrifices we are called to refrain from making is crucial to faithfully following the way of Jesus.

## Sermon

If you have heard much of my preaching over the last few years – and some of you have been masochistic enough to hear quite a lot of it – you will have probably noticed me being quite critical of a lot of Christian thinking about sacrifice. I have repeatedly said that the way many Christians have interpreted the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins is a blasphemy that casts God as a blood-thirsty monster and conflicts fundamentally with the teachings of Jesus himself. You will have probably heard me quoting Jesus, who was in turn quoting the prophets, saying that God desires mercy not sacrifice.

But tonight we heard the Apostle Paul urging us to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, and saying that such sacrifice is the right way to worship God. So if God desires mercy, not sacrifice, what is Paul talking about? Has he got it wrong? And has our liturgy got it wrong too? Each week as we offer prayers over the bread and wine at this table, we say to God “here we offer and present to you ourselves, our bodies, minds and spirits, to be a holy and continuous sacrifice to you.” That prayer is obviously echoing the words we heard tonight from the Apostle, but how can they be right if Jesus says that God desires mercy, not sacrifice?

To further confuse the question, we have all sorts of religious extremists running around talking about holy sacrifices as they inflict terror and bloodshed on the rest of the world. And then we have nations like ours talking about the sacrifice made by our military personal who are fighting against those same extremists. How are we to sort out this sacrifice business and make some sort of useful sense out of it?

It seems to me that much of the confusion arises from overlooking the fact that the Bible and our religious traditions speak of several quite different kinds of sacrifice. If we lump them all together and confuse them with one another, we end up in all sorts of mess. Even in the biblical laws about the offering of sacrifices in the old Hebrew temple, there was a multitude of different sacrifices with different requirements and different meanings. Some involved shedding blood. Some didn't. Some were about seeking forgiveness for sin. Others were about expressing gratitude. Others were about making vows or dedications. The slaughtering and burning of an animal on an altar to atone for sin is obviously the biggest and most dramatic one, so it gets all the attention, but that attention can blind us to the important fact that it is only one among many.

I'm not going to go through the catalogue of sacrifices in the Hebrew bible tonight, interesting though that might be. Instead I want to draw your attention to three broad categories of sacrifice that are of great relevance in the way we talk about sacrifice today and in the way we treat one another in today's world. These three are quite different from each other.

The first type that I want to highlight is penal sacrifice, which is all about dealing with sin. It views sin as an offence against God, or against the gods, and it sees the offence as something that incurs a penalty which must be paid before normal life can be resumed. If the penalty is not paid, then the gods are likely to punish us in a range of other ways.

You can see how this understanding underpins all sorts of things that we see and hear every day. It underpins most of our penal system. Those who have committed crimes are seen as owing a debt to society or incurring a penalty that must be paid before they can return to normal life. Even if they are completely repentant and reformed, most of us still feel that the penalty must be paid, the punishment must be endured.

A devastating hurricane has slammed into the coast of Texas overnight, and you can be quite sure that there will be angry preachers who will announce that the hurricane is God's angry judgement on a nation that has refused to face up to its sin and put their trust in the right sacrifice. Only when we turn to God and pay the price demanded can the anger of God be appeased and the nation be kept safe, they say.

The biggest problem with this model of sacrifice is that it assumes that God is just like the pagan gods, angry and vengeful and violent, and that God can be bought off with a payment of blood. This is precisely what Jesus was challenging about the temple sacrificial system when he quoted the prophets saying that God wants mercy not sacrifice and that God's love is generous and universal and doesn't need to be bought. But despite his own critique of such ideas, a lot of Christian theology has tried to squeeze Jesus into this old system by suggesting that the death of Jesus is itself a blood sacrifice to appease an angry and hostile God.

The second form of sacrifice I want to talk about also existed within the ancient Hebrew system of religious sacrifices, but it is perhaps even more common among us today. I'm going to call this the purging sacrifice. In the purging sacrifice, we seek to deal with evil and sin by correctly identifying its source and purging or expelling it from our midst. You can probably think of numerous laws and stories from the Hebrew bible that talk about the importance of either expelling or executing the one who has defiled the community by bringing sin into its midst. With executions, this category often overlaps with the previous category, because the death may be seen both as a purging of evil and as an offering to appease the angry god.

In its basic form though, we see it in the Hebrew sacrificial ritual from which we get the word "scapegoat". On the Day of Atonement, the priest would ritually transfer responsibility for the sins of the people onto a goat, and then the goat would be driven out from among the people into the wilderness, never to return. Thus was the people's evil purged from their midst, leaving the nation with its purity restored and thus acceptable to God again.

This idea that we can be made pure by purging the evil from our midst inevitably gets tied up with identifying that evil with particular people who therefore need to be expelled from among us. Among the Hebrew people this got bound up with the expectations of the messiah, as one who would wield the sword and drive out the evil doers. When Peter identified Jesus as the messiah in the gospel reading we heard tonight, it is probable that the reason Jesus told him to keep that opinion quiet was that he knew that Peter could not yet separate the idea of the messiah from a violent crusader who would drive out the Romans, and he didn't want to encourage messiah talk until the disciples had reimagined what that meant.

The instinct to purify ourselves by purging our community of the evil other is horribly apparent in any number of burning current issues in our community, and you can usually see it on both sides.

Groups like the One Nation party and the United Patriots will invoke racial or religious differences as evidence of an evil that threatens our community, and they will advocate a purge. We need to build walls, strengthen borders, turn back boats, ban burkhas, and expel potential

suspects. Only by banishing the threat can our lives and our culture be safe, they say. But the same instinct is equally apparent among their opponents. We easily find ourselves looking for ways of silencing or expelling those whose views we find so abhorrent. Like Hilary Clinton with her “basket of deplorables” attitude, we purge them from our concept of “our community” and regard them as an alien presence whose anxieties and welfare have no claim on our compassion or attention. And as Hilary found out, our very desire to purge them from our midst deepens their anger and gives them a clear common enemy to unite against.

The same-sex marriage debate that is currently raging here in Australia is frequently marked by the same polarisation as each side sees the other as an abhorrence that needs to be silenced and purged from our midst before it infects us with its poison. It is often expressed in explicitly religious terms by those who oppose same-sex marriage, because they see it as a trojan horse that is literally bringing a whole range of moral toxins into our community to destroy everything we hold dear. It must be expelled, and nothing is too heavy-handed or too rude in the face of such threats. Thus many of us were shocked by the Archbishop’s implied threat to sack employees of the Catholic education system who marry same-sex partners. And I was shocked to hear that on a suburban hockey field yesterday, at the end of a game involving my daughter’s hockey team who wear a rainbow sleeve on their hockey shirts, when her captain went to thank the referee at the end of the game, that referee said, “Well, I just have to tell you why I’ll be voting no,” and proceeded to give her an uninvited lecture. She was just trying to thank him for doing a good job as the referee.

But the trouble is that, as a supporter of same-sex marriage, I have been just as shocked by the atrocious and equally aggressive behaviour that has often characterised those on my own side of the debate. We too have demanded that people we disagree with be dismissed from their jobs or have their names removed from sports stadiums or be literally or metaphorically run out of town. I know gay people who don’t support the idea of same-sex marriage because they regard it as an alien hetero-normative construct being forced upon them, but who are now afraid to say so because no dissent, however nuanced, is currently being allowed in their community. I totally accept that hate speech should be silenced because it can literally kill, but I am horrified when I find myself instinctively wanting to resort to the same tactics as my opponents to vilify and shame and purge my world of that which I don’t like.

I also know that although such purging sacrifices seek to create peace within our group by ridding it of divisive differences and by uniting us against a common enemy who is now on the outside, it doesn’t actually work. The truth is that trying to unify a group by eliminating differences actually leads to increasing conflict, because the more alike we become, the more we are offended by increasingly minor differences, and the purge goes on. That’s precisely why the Apostle Paul went on to tell us in the same passage that we need to recognise that the different members of the body all have different functions. If we all want to be the same, we’ll be torn apart by rivalries and conflicts. Peace will be found by learning to honour one another with our differences, not by seeking to purge every error or evil from our midst. Jesus was a constant critic of the practices of seeking religious purity by expelling and excluding those who were deemed to be a threat to it.

So if neither penal sacrifice nor purging sacrifice meet the Jesus sniff test – does it smell like Jesus? – what is it that Paul is talking about when he calls us as followers of Jesus to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God?

Well the most immediate and obvious difference here is that the sacrifice that he is calling you to offer is you yourself. It is not about identifying someone else who should be sacrificed. This is self-sacrifice. It is about setting aside our own personal desires in order to seek the good of others, the

good of the whole. You know what this looks like in your personal relationships. Often the good of the relationship is best served by relinquishing a personal preference in order to find a pathway that is mutually beneficial. Jesus calls us to do this on the larger stage as well. He calls us to take up our cross and to follow him in pouring out our lives for the life of the world.

Sometimes that just means giving up selfish things that weren't much good for you anyway. But sometimes it can be seriously costly, and as Jesus showed, it can even extend to giving up your life for others. That may look like a physical risking of your life to protect or rescue others from harm. Or it may look like losing the love and respect of friends or family because you refused to participate in their crusades to purge the world of their hated evil other. Try standing strongly against the vilification of opponents from either side of the same-sex marriage debate, and you will likely see what I mean. But this pattern of self-sacrifice seeks peace, not by eliminating the other, but by creating space in which the other might be shown grace and hospitality and love. When Jesus called us to love our enemies, he didn't say that we could be excused from that if our enemies said mean-spirited things that we found hurtful.

Now I do have to acknowledge that the idea of self-sacrifice can mutate into something dangerous and ungodly too, especially if it is combined with a crusade for a purging sacrifice. The religious extremists who blow themselves up or get themselves killed while trying to purge the world of the evils they abhor show how this can happen, but there is no hint of that in the words of Paul or Jesus.

The religious and political leaders who had Jesus executed clearly saw his execution as a purging sacrifice. They were eliminating a dangerous threat from the midst of the community. Much Christian theology since then has tried to fit the death of Jesus into a penal sacrifice mindset and seen his death as buying our forgiveness by paying the penalty demanded by an offended and angry God. But you won't find any support for such views in the words or teachings of Jesus himself. He consistently described God as a loving father who is only too ready to forgive and welcome us with loving arms, and all the evidence of the Jesus stories suggests that he saw his own death as simply the inevitable self-sacrificial consequence of standing up for the victims against a powerful self-interested system that was constantly sacrificing them and alienating them from the love of God.

Thus the Apostle Paul follows his call to offer yourselves as living sacrifices with his call to not be conformed to this world. This is not a change of topic. We can either conform to the ways that our societies construct themselves around the rejection and sacrifice of others, or we can, as Paul says, be transformed by the renewing of our minds according to the mind of Jesus, the way of Jesus. As we watch the world tearing itself apart around us, perhaps it is increasingly obvious that the self-sacrificing way of Jesus is not just some utopian dream for wide-eyed idealists, but is actually the last and only hope for a world that is sacrificing itself to death. So, brothers and sisters, present your bodies as a living sacrifices to God, and do not be conformed to the sacrificial madness of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.