

1 Epiphany 1 – Luke 2:41-52

St. Paul admonishes us to present our bodies as living sacrifices, pleasing and acceptable to God.

All the sacrifices in the Bible can be divided into two basic types. First, there is the atoning sacrifice. This was represented by the sin and guilt offerings given by the priests in the temple. On the day of atonement, the high priest entered into the most holy place to sprinkle the blood of goats and bulls on top of the mercy seat, also known as the atonement covering. These atoning sacrifices pointed forward to the true atonement found in Christ. He gave his blood to be shed on the cross for us. He bore the sin of the world and reconciled guilty mortals to the living God.

Second, there is the sacrifice of thanksgiving. This was represented by the grain and food offerings and the burning of incense in the temple. In Psalm 116, David sings, “I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call upon the name of the LORD.” And in Psalm 51, he sings, “You do not desire sacrifices, or else I would give it. You do not delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” These sacrifices of thanksgiving describe the response of those who believe and are saved.

We cannot atone for our own sins. Only Christ did that. It is there this second type of sacrifice that St. Paul urges us to present to God. He appeals to us by the mercies of God, the gospel that makes us acceptable to him in the first place. The mercy of God is found in the atoning sacrifice of his Son, which has put his anger away and presents us righteous before his heavenly throne. Therefore, resting on this mercy of God, we present our bodies as living sacrifices to God.

We offer our bodies up as sacrifices of thanksgiving. It’s not just our hearts and souls that are pleasing to God. He has also redeemed our bodies, which he promises to raise up on the last day. The Holy Spirit has claimed our bodies as his own temple. He teaches us to stay away from sexual immorality. Don’t treat your body like a piece of meat. Because God has given you life. You are alive to God who raised his Son from the dead.

And yet, these living sacrifices of our bodies are not just mindless acts of obedience, going through the motions and obeying arbitrary rules. No, St. Paul teaches us that this is our worship as thinking beings. When we refuse to go along with the world, we aren’t just stubbornly following old traditions. No, we are offering ourselves to God who has claimed us as his own and set us apart from this dying world.

This is why St. Paul urges us to be renewed in our minds. It’s so that we can discern God’s will. Don’t be conformed to the spirits of this age. Instead, test the spirits. Learn to identify what is good and pleasing to God. Seek to understand why you believe what you believe and why you live the way you live. When you grow in wisdom, then this is pleasing to God who loves it when his children learn to confess his name.

As we present our sacrifices of thanksgiving to God, we don’t all look the same. We all have different roles in the body of Christ. We are many parts of the same body. Some seem more important to this world. Some seem less important. But all gifts and duties come from the same

2 Epiphany 1 – Luke 2:41-52

Lord. We are all parts of his body, and we are therefore parts of one another. So when we present our bodies and talents in service to him, we are supporting one another in love.

Our gifts are different according to what God gives by his grace and wisdom. Some are more eloquent, but we all confess the same faith. Some are given more public responsibilities. Others encourage in a less noticeable way. Some lead and manage while others play supporting roles. Some sing well, which encourages the more timid voices to join in to praise God for his acts of salvation. The saints are generous with their time and talents in many ways. In all of this, St. Paul urges us not to think too highly of ourselves. Instead, be sober and reasonable. He who provides our gifts and duties also provides the faith to trust him and the strength to carry out these tasks.

All the while, when we are depending on God's mercies in Christ, then we can be certain that these meager sacrifices of thanksgiving are precious and pleasing to our Father in heaven.

When Jesus was a boy, he went to the temple for the annual feast of the Passover. When his parents started on their journey home, he stayed in the temple. He is the Lord of the temple. He is the very glory who filled the temple in the days of Solomon. But here he goes to the temple in humility to ask questions from the teachers. They were amazed at his questions and his understanding. After all, he is the very Wisdom from God in the flesh. But he hid his full glory under the form of a servant. He was content to grow in wisdom as he got older. In the meantime, he submitted to his parents, entrusting himself to their care.

Mary and Joseph didn't understand why Jesus had stayed behind. They were beside themselves, anxiously thinking that perhaps they had lost him. When they finally found him, they asked him why he treated them in this way. Any other child would likely put his head down in shame, knowing that he should have paid attention when his family was leaving. Or the child would be crying and afraid that he had lost his parents. Or maybe the child would be proud and rebellious, angry at his parents for getting on his case.

But Jesus did not react in any of these ways. He has come to earth to do the will of the one who sent him. He therefore responded to his parents, "Why were you looking for Me? Didn't you realize I must be in My Father's house?"

There is not a shred of disrespect, fear, or shame in these words. He speaks with pure innocence combined with a bold confidence. Jesus knows who he is. He is the Son of God. He must be in his Father's house. Other translations have Jesus say that he must be about his Father's business. In either case, Jesus knows why his Father has sent him. It is at the temple where he would proclaim that God's kingdom has come. It would be at the temple where he would be condemned by the leaders of his people before being delivered over to the Romans and crucified on the cross. Jesus, God's Son, came into this world to be the atoning sacrifice to take away sin.

So there he is in the temple, offering his body as a living sacrifice, pleasing and acceptable to God. He is the Lord of all, yet he comes in humility and obedience to his Father. His obedience

3 Epiphany 1 – Luke 2:41-52

serves as the atonement for all sinners. His obedience is credited to us poor, foolish sinners freely by God's grace. His obedience is the very mercy of God to us. It is the righteousness in which we trust and by which we stand at peace with God.

It is a great wonder that he who knew all things and from whom all the prophets spoke would ask questions. It is a great wonder that he who is the Lord of all would submit to his parents. It is a great mystery that God's Son came into this world not to be served but to serve and give himself up as a ransom and atoning sacrifice for our sins. With Mary, we do well to ponder this great mystery in our hearts. Think about it. Let it occupy your mind as you render your service of thanksgiving to God.

Our Lord's humble obedience does two things. First and foremost, it stands as our righteousness before God. By one man's obedience, righteousness and life have come to all people. This is the mercy of God and the good news of our salvation. It is the object of our faith, which God counts as righteousness. Whenever we hear the gospel, clothed by Christ in our baptism, eating his body and blood, it is his obedience unto death that is credited to us by faith. He did not grow in wisdom for his own sake, as if he needed it. No, he did it all for us. God has declared Jesus to be our wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

Second, our Lord's humble obedience serves as our example. See how he takes the lower seat. See how he honors both his Father in heaven as well as his parents on earth. Learn from him. Because like Jesus, you don't need to learn wisdom for your own status. You already have knowledge of salvation. You already stand righteous before God. Instead, God teaches you wisdom in this life by giving you your earthly duties and gifts. And in this way, he tests and proves your faith to be genuine. When you fall short, he uses this to humble you and drive you closer to his mercy and kindness. When your work seems weak and unfruitful, God is simply teaching you to acknowledge his work to save you. Through all of this, he teaches you wisdom. And it is precious in his sight.

This is why, even though we are all equally sons of God and members of Christ, God doesn't just do away with all outward differences. Men, women, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, children, those with this or that gift, ability, or experience – God uses them all to strengthen the entire body. We all offer our bodies and talents to God, not to earn his favor, but with the confidence that we already have his favor because of Christ.

God gives each a different role. We see this in the epistles. He entrusts the leading of the prayers, public reading of Scripture, and worship at church and home to the men. He calls certain men to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. He doesn't call the women to do these things. He wants them to learn in silence, care for their children, encourage one another, and use their various talents as they adorn themselves with good works and a gentle spirit, which is precious in his sight (1 Timothy 2:8-15; 3:1 ff.; 4:13-16; 1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 1 Peter 3:1 ff.). He desires the children to grow in wisdom and the fear of the Lord (Eph 6:1 ff.).

4 Epiphany 1 – Luke 2:41-52

He desires all to offer themselves as living sacrifices to him, each with the faith he himself provides.

The Scriptures are filled with a host of different roles and services, which he gives us all to carry out. Because we all serve him. But we don't all lift the same kind of weight. We all teach and admonish, some publicly in the church, some to the children, others to their friends, coworkers, and neighbors. We encourage one another and confess his Word through hymns, Psalms, and songs. All the while, God has called us to different stations. He's given us different gifts. So whatever he has given you to do, follow the example of your Lord. Learn from his humility, but also learn from his boldness. And leave it up to God to produce the fruit.

But most importantly, God has called us all to hear his Word and believe his promise of salvation. This is the highest and greatest worship of God. It isn't how much you are doing in church, however public or private that may be. No, it is faith that holds onto the mercy of God in Christ. It is the ear that hears his Word. It is the broken heart and contrite spirit that finds refuge from sin and guilt in the peace and comfort of the gospel.

As Christians, we offer ourselves to God as sacrifices of thanksgiving, not so we can boast about how much we do, but so we would learn to discern his good and gracious will in our lives. We aren't called simply to jump through hoops or blindly follow orders. He calls you to understand why you live the way you do for his service. Discern and ponder his saving truth. Some are more discerning than others. It's all for the sake of building up the body of believers. But the greatest treasure, which he causes to occupy your heart and mind, is the atoning sacrifice of his Son. He was humble and obedient in your place.

So depend on this mercy in whatever station God has placed you. And when you get discouraged by the sin, failures, and thanklessness that so often accompany these earthly duties, don't be anxious. Your Savior does not despise you. You know where he can be found. He remains in his Father's house, about his Father's business, as he dwells with you in his Word. He continues to feed you with his body and blood, strengthening you by his Holy Spirit, bestowing on you the confidence of the forgiveness of your sins, and showering you with the sure mercy of the living God. Therefore, cast your cares upon him, because he cares for you. His sacrifice avails for you. And for his sake, God is pleased with you. Let us pray:

But worthless is my sacrifice, I own it;
Yet, Lord, for love's sake Thou wilt not disown it;
Thou wilt accept my gift in Thy great meekness
Nor shame my weakness. Amen.