

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. (Rom 12:1)

The question I wish to immerse us into today is ‘what will you sacrifice’?

Sacrifice is a theme throughout Scripture, found in its earliest pages and alluded to even in its conclusion, when we consider the multitude of times the altar is referenced.

I speak not of formal, ritual sacrifice under the law, where even free will sacrifices had a largely prescriptive nature and form to them. I refer to those sacrifices we make that are personal, perhaps having meaning only between ourselves and our God. A sacrifice that if known to others might not either seem like much of a sacrifice.

John the Baptist made this sort of sacrifice in his ministry. While many point to his steadfast preaching and unwillingness to retract the truth he spoke to Herod that we see in Mark 6 as his key sacrifice

“For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.”
(Mar 6:17-18)

I point to the way he lived his life as being a much greater sacrifice

“And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey;” (Mar 1:6)

Not to get into some academic qualitative study on the empirical value of a sacrifice, but there is something to be said for the longevity of a thing like walking around the wilderness day after day, unsure of where your meal will come from, but trusting that it will come; there is a great deal of fortitude to be emulated in a man who seeks his audience more than he seeks his logistics.

Christ clearly told us

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”
(Joh 15:13)

And I obviously can't argue with that. It is the ultimate sacrifice and it can only be made once, obviously, so it is the ultimate expression of love toward one's friend. I'm not asking whether you are willing to lay down your lives for Christ, that's a different thing, an ultimate thing really that I don't know you can really say for sure you're willing to do until you get into that situation. That's another conversation entirely, though.

We know that there are dramatic things we should expect to give up in our service to the King

“And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.” (Mat 19:29)

We should be ready and expectant that we should give up some if not all our familial ties in the earth, and we've talked about this a lot due to the interest the world has in our behavior in this matter.

Followers of Christ should be ready and willing to sacrifice all their personal possessions, as we saw those early Christians do

“Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.” (Act 4:34-35)

That's a dramatic thing to behold – people all selling their homes and property to pool their resources for the common good. That's a serious sacrifice. And of course, the result of not having that willingness but rather being desirous of looking like you do is displayed in equally dramatic manner.

“But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him. And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.” (Act 5:3-10)

Making a sacrifice, even though not under the law is still serious business that should be treated with all gravity. It isn't a badge of honor you wear or a thing you do for recognition, as this example obviously shows.

Of course, the general suffering of God's people spoken of throughout Scripture is a form of sacrifice if we endure it

"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake;" (Php 1:29)

"Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." (2Ti 3:12)

"Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season;" (Heb 11:25)

So getting to the specific event I want to look at in detail today

"Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek." (Act 16:3)

This is an extreme example of willingness to sacrifice and a supreme illustration of loving your enemies. This event should drive you to ask yourself what you would give up not just to serve Christ, but just to be able to talk about Christ with someone?

Let's look at the details of this a little deeper

"Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek. And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily." (Act 16:1-5)

Paul wants to take Timothy with him because he had a wonderful report of the brethren and was willing to fully engage with him in his work of traveling abroad to spread the Gospel. That was a big deal, and a sacrifice in and of itself. Travel in those days was hard, it literally meant taking your life into your hands more often than not, and while we have airplane engines occasionally falling off or stupid drivers around us, we don't deal with robbers, and shipwrecks, and the sheer time engaged in traveling as Paul and his companions did in the early days of the church.

Paul saw a problem arising, however, in his ability to engage the Jews in their

synagogues if Timothy went with him to help.

Basically, if Timothy went to do some of his own preaching on the grounds of the synagogue, the Jews wouldn't receive him even though his mother was a Jewess, since his father was a Greek and he was not circumcised.

Now, I have looked at this for years and been confounded by it, quite honestly, along several vectors.

First, let's address what to me is the elephant in the room – the contents of a person's pants aren't any of your stinkin' business! But that's not the reality of their day. There's lots of ways those Jews may have known Timothy to be uncircumcised, but the likely reality is they would have asked, and Paul isn't interested in lying about that, and neither is Timothy. So you're going to have to address it if you're going to keep preaching the way Paul had been preaching, either by getting into a fight every time you go to preach to the Jews, and a fight that isn't particularly relevant, or doing something about it. Paul asked Timothy and he submitted to fixing the problem.

That leads to my second problem vector. We have lots of experience with this – if they won't let you in the building (have they ever let us in the building??), you stand on the sidewalk outside of it. If they won't let you on that sidewalk, you stand across the street. If they won't let you across the street, you stand outside their 500-foot zone. And always, get the words in the public eye where they can't easily shut you down.

That's just not the way this worked in those days, though, and that logistical detail has been a hang-up for me for a long time. I've simply not been able to build a perspective that is relatable. Why is Paul asking Timothy to do a thing this drastic just so the Jews would entertain them laying out these arguments? This can't be just a cultural difference here, or it wouldn't be recorded for us in this manner. And don't think this isn't a big deal. Remember what Simeon and Levi did in the matter of Dinah

“And unto Hamor and unto Shechem his son hearkened all that went out of the gate of his city; and every male was circumcised, all that went out of the gate of his city. And it came to pass on the third day, when they were sore, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brethren, took each man his sword, and came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males.” (Gen 34:24-25)

Three days after those grown men are circumcised, they're still too afflicted by the event to put up a defense for their lives. While Simeon and Levi likely had some help from either brothers or servants, they still cut off the entire grown male population of this city without resistance. What Timothy does here is a significant thing, especially given Paul's viewpoint on it. Yes, after a week or so he would have been okay, but still, this was a significant thing for Timothy to do this.

The bottom line here is that Paul didn't see an alternative to engaging in the synagogues as a regular part of his ministry. If he had, he would have done it. He didn't do a thing just to do it and be different.

Which brings me to my third trouble vector. Paul wasn't shy about this circumcision issue and his absolute rejection of the need to impose this burden on the Gentiles. When people showed up in Antioch teaching that the Gentiles must be circumcised, Paul would have none of it

“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.” (Act 15:1-2)

Of course, Paul and Barnabas take the trip to Jerusalem and engage in discussions regarding these matters with the other Apostles and elders, seeking to come to a consensus. James summarizes the outcome of that discussion by saying

“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.” (Act 15:19-20)

The clear decision was that the Gentiles were not to be burdened with these physical requirements and indicators of Judaism. Paul deals with this at least once more in the matter of Titus.

“But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me:” (Gal 2:3-6)

There is a wealth of knowledge to be gained from this passage and its whole context. And though this language has always seemed a little confusing to me, with some study it gains clarity, especially if you try to look at the overall series of events in the Acts and work to put them in context with Paul's epistles. What Paul is saying is he, Barnabas and Titus went to Jerusalem and were accosted by false brethren who had crept into the assembly – yes, the assembly at Jerusalem where there were so many men of great spiritual strength, had false brethren infiltrate the ranks, as it were. A great

caution for us, to be sure, but not the focus of today's discussion.

These false brethren were accusing Paul of teaching a doctrine not in line with what the Apostles in Jerusalem were teaching, and one of the proof points they used was that Titus was not circumcised. Titus, being a Greek, would never have had occasion to and was now under no necessity of circumcision; the church leaders had already established this as being the case.

But these false men were making the strong case that he **was** under this obligation and pressed the matter enough that Paul says with some emphasis "...we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour". All he's saying is we didn't entertain their arguments for so much as one second. We stood firm in what we know to be the Gospel truth so that "...the truth of the gospel might continue with you". In other words, we aren't out here floundering around wondering what the Gospel truth actually is. The truth isn't a negotiable, malleable thing just because people don't understand what is true or try to use their influence to make something be true that isn't.

So, if he's so adamantly opposed to forcing circumcision on the Gentiles, what is he doing having Timothy get circumcised? Is this not the height of hypocrisy and a falling away from established doctrine? Are Paul or Timothy doing something wrong even?

In short, no, I don't believe so, though this event has troubled me for a long time as to what was really going on here. There are many expositors who will try to make the case Paul is mis-stepping, and others who essentially gloss over it with a "Paul can do what he wants" kind of attitude.

There are also those I think are false teachers who will try to convince you Paul recanted or was confused about what was right. They use this as some proof point that religion should change with the times. I dismiss this as utter sophistry. Remember, it was Paul who brought the question as to whether the Gentiles ought not be under such bondage. He clearly agreed with Peter's argument at Acts 15:10, that the Jews had no right to expect the Gentiles to adhere to these rules when they themselves couldn't keep them.

No there is something else going on here, and it stands as a grand example to us.

When it says "because of the Jews" it doesn't mean because of a religious obligation to circumcision. This is where I've had a lot of difficulty over the years. Circumcision was a religious act, a sign of obedience to the laws of God, an outward indicator of the covenant God established with Abraham. How can you submit to that without the religious trappings associated with it?

Well, religious significance is a two-way street. How many times have we talked about 'going through the motions' as it were, or performing some seemingly religious act with

a malicious intent, like Ananias and Sapphira did with the selling of their property? You can perform an action without assigning any religious significance to it, and that's where I've tripped up. This is a neutral action Timothy takes here, and unlike eating things sacrificed to idols, you can't say that the neutral activity is wrong. When you sit at table and eat something sacrificed to an idol with the person who sacrificed it, you're acknowledging the sacrifice and their beliefs. You can't attach that same significance to something you do to yourself for your own reasons. Hopefully that's clear.

In our society where we walk around with it beat into our heads from birth that we have the right to tell anyone and everyone our opinion about anything, what Paul and Timothy dealt with may be difficult to wrap our minds around.

Even though Paul was largely focused on the Gentiles, he obviously spent a lot of time talking to the Jews. In those days, that meant going to where they were, and spending time in their midst. There wasn't any CNN, or Tweeting or web sites. No newspapers or community bulletin boards. You had to actually, physically go talk to the people you were trying to deliver your message to.

In the case of these Jews, that meant going into their synagogues. The synagogues were the center of Jewish life at the time, and Paul spent a significant amount of time within them. As he traveled throughout the Roman Empire, he routinely came to the Jewish synagogues to preach first. We can see several examples of this behavior throughout Acts

“And when they were at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews: and they had also John to their minister.” (Act 13:5)

“But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and sat down.” (Act 13:14)

“And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed.” (Act 14:1)

“And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks.” (Act 18:4)

Of course, the next thing that regularly happens is the Jews kick him out, so he goes to the Gentiles.

Despite knowing that this would happen, Paul and Timothy had a sincere desire to reach these people; they felt that it was an absolutely necessary element of fulfilling the commission given by Christ. The Jews are, after all, part of the world He commands His preachers to go into. They were willing to sacrifice anything within their

power to show these, their enemies, a genuine and sincere love. Literally nothing was going to stop them, even the social mores of the day. They knew that if they went into a synagogue with Timothy uncircumcised, it would destroy their ability to preach – not that they cared what the Jews thought of the issue, and not as an element of sanctification. That’s the key point. This was not a religious act, because they didn’t put any religious significance into the act. It was an act done out of love to these souls, doing everything they could to get out of their way and remove barriers to their hearing.

Paul had plenty of experience with this specific argument and problem, this being the most extreme example

“And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place.” (Act 21:27-28)

The Jews couldn’t look past their own idolatry and self-righteousness to listen to a man who they considered ‘unclean’ by reason of being uncircumcised. Seeing this, and seeing that there was no prohibition against doing it, Timothy agreed to do this thing.

This is love, tremendous love of your enemies. To take a thing like circumcision, which Timothy well understood (his mother being a Jew), and keep his faith as a Christian that it had no salvific effect, but recognizing it had a logistical effect, to submit to it, is an amazing feat that I have struggled and failed to find a suitable parallel in our time.

Yes, we sacrifice our funds, our time and many things to preach and as the result of persecution, but that is not what Timothy did in this instance. He sacrificed himself just so that people would hear him speak, to remove a barrier to their hearing. That is truly presenting his “body as a living sacrifice”, where every day he would have been reminded of the needfulness of the act to reach these Jews and get them to hear, if not actually listen.

This isn’t a defense of the ‘winning souls to Jesus’ argument. This was what these men saw as the minimum needful thing just to be able to spread the Gospel to the Jewish nation. While Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles, or uncircumcised, you see that he didn’t require Peter, or one of the other Apostles to the circumcision (Gal 2) to travel along with him or behind him to focus on the Jewish converts. He did the whole job, and Timothy was willing to do whatever it took to help him in that. They weren’t particularly interested in anything except reaching those that God had preserved, and he had no qualms about walking away from pointless disputings

“And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. And when they

opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.” (Act 18:5-6)

The point being here that he wasn't trying to win their souls. He was out to deliver the message by any means necessary. Period.

Consider this – Timothy could have refused. He could have told Paul that he would go spend time with the Gentiles until the Jews kicked Paul out of the synagogue and they could meet up together afterward. But he didn't. He submitted to the idea. He submitted to the notion seeing there was nothing wrong with it, too. Without the religious significance attached to it, it was just something he did to his body to appease the silly notions of the Jews. He didn't call attention to it as a 'good work', he just did what was needful to minister to Paul and to spread the good news, and from the text it was never called attention to again. That's genuine sacrifice – doing what is needful and moving on.

Doing what is needful is a consistent theme in Paul's behavior

“For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.” (1Co 9:16-23)

He will be anything to anyone if that helps them to hear his words. He doesn't issue an ultimatum of 'take me as I am'. Obviously, he isn't talking about 'winning souls to Jesus' – he's never made that argument. When he says, 'that I might gain the more', he isn't talking about their salvation, he's talking about creating an environment where he doesn't sacrifice the message to get people to listen, he sacrifices himself. He sets aside his own hubris and pride to address any and all audiences he finds himself in front of. He sacrifices his sense of self, identifying only as a servant.

There's another thing to take from this. Look at this as a prime example of temperance

“And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness;” (2Pe 1:6)

This is how Paul lived his life, and how he clearly taught Timothy; this is the example set for us. Do what is needed to preach Christ, putting away all things of the flesh or carnality and sacrificing whatever is needful to sacrifice. How many times have we gotten wrapped around the axle about some issue of the flesh, that has no real bearing on our ability to serve one another and our fellow man. How frequently have we been sidetracked from our message by some wrong we perceive being done to us, or left off the duties we have to one another because we want to do something ‘our way’. Paul had no ‘his way’ approach. Think about the various cultures and peoples he found himself amongst regularly. He had no ties to anything but God and serving and was willing to give up everything that was unique about him to be the least of His servants. If one of the greatest of His apostles would do that, how can we not follow the example?

I can’t tell you what you should sacrifice. I can’t tell you when you should sacrifice. I can only tell you that these sorts of free-will sacrifices, the making of our bodies a “living sacrifice, holy acceptable unto God”, including the sacrifice of self as Paul did, is a reasonable part of our occupation.

I suggest to you that it is proper to prepare yourself for being called to such a sacrifice by meditating on this example and through prayer, so that when the opportunity arises, it is not a surprise and you don’t find yourself floundering or questioning what is going on. Instead, you find yourself ready, as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and here as Timothy did, to declare “**here am I**” (Gen 22:11, Gen 31:11, Ex 3:4, 1 Sam 3:4), and the only way to properly prepare for that call is to empty ourselves of our connection to the flesh as Paul taught Timothy to do. “Here am I”, not only as it relates to the preaching but in every facet of our lives.