**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ROMANS-026**. **THE SACRIFICE OF THE BODY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"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."*

*Romans 12:1*

In the former part of this letter the Apostle has been building up a massive fabric of doctrine, which has stood the waste of centuries, and the assaults of enemies, and has been the home of devout souls. He now passes to speak of practice, and he binds the two halves of his letter indissolubly together by that significant therefore, which does not only look back to the thing last said, but to the whole of the preceding portion of the letter. What God hath joined together let no man put asunder. Christian living is inseparably connected with Christian believing. Possibly the error of our forefathers was in cutting faith too much loose from practice, and supposing that an orthodox creed was sufficient, though I think the extent to which they did suppose that has been very much exaggerated. The temptation of this day is precisely the opposite. Conduct is three-fourths of life, says one of our teachers. Yes. But what about the fourth fourth which underlies conduct? Paul's way is the right way. Lay broad and deep the foundations of God's facts revealed to us, and then build upon that the fabric of a noble life. This generation superficially tends to cut practice loose from faith, and so to look for grapes from thorns and figs from thistles. Wrong thinking will not lead to right doing. I beseech you, therefore, brethren, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice.

The Apostle, in beginning his practical exhortations, lays as the foundations of them all two companion precepts: one, with which we have to deal, affecting mainly the outward life; its twin sister, which follows in the next verse, affecting mainly the inward life. He who has drunk in the spirit of Paul's doctrinal teaching will present his body a living sacrifice, and be renewed in the spirit of his mind; and thus, outwardly and inwardly, will be approximating to God's ideal, and all specific virtues will be his in germ. Those two precepts lay down the broad outline, and all that follow in the way of specific commandments is but filling in its details.

**I. We observe that we have here, first, an all-inclusive directory for the outward life.**

Now, it is to be noticed that the metaphor of sacrifice runs through the whole of the phraseology of my text. The word rendered present is a technical expression for the sacerdotal action of offering. A tacit contrast is drawn between the sacrificial ritual, which was familiar to Romans as well as Jews, and the true Christian sacrifice and service. In the former a large portion of the sacrifices consisted of animals which were slain. Ours is to be a living sacrifice. In the former the offering was presented to the Deity, and became His property. In the Christian service, the gift passes, in like manner, from the possession of the worshipper, and is set apart for the uses of God, for that is the proper meaning of the word holy. The outward sacrifice gave an odour of a sweet smell, which, by a strong metaphor, was declared to be fragrant in the nostrils of Deity. In like manner, the Christian sacrifice is acceptable unto God. These other sacrifices were purely outward, and derived no efficacy from the disposition of the worshipper. Our sacrifice, though the material of the offering be corporeal, is the act of the inner man, and so is called rational rather than reasonable, as our Version has it, or as in other parts of Scripture, spiritual. And the last word of my text, service, retains the sacerdotal allusion, because it does not mean the service of a slave or domestic, but that of a priest.

And so the sum of the whole is that the master-word for the outward life of a Christian is sacrifice. That, again, includes two things--self-surrender and surrender to God.

Now, Paul was not such a superficial moralist as to begin at the wrong end, and talk about the surrender of the outward life, unless as the result of the prior surrender of the inward, and that priority of the consecration of the man to his offering of the body is contained in the very metaphor. For a priest needs to be consecrated before he can offer, and we in our innermost wills, in the depths of our nature, must be surrendered and set apart to God ere any of our outward activities can be laid upon His altar. The Apostle, then, does not make the mistake of substituting external for internal surrender, but he presupposes that the latter has preceded. He puts the sequence more fully in the parallel passage in this very letter: Yield yourselves unto God, and your bodies as instruments of righteousness unto Him. So, then, first of all, we must be priests by our inward consecration, and then, since a priest must have somewhat to offer, we must bring the outward life and lay it upon His altar.

Now, of the two thoughts which I have said are involved in this great keyword, the former is common to Christianity, with all noble systems of morality, whether religious or irreligious. It is a commonplace, on which I do not need to dwell, that every man who will live a man's life, and not that of a beast, must sacrifice the flesh, and rigidly keep it down. But that commonplace is lifted into an altogether new region, assumes a new solemnity, and finds new power for its fulfilment when we add to the moralist's duty of control of the animal and outward nature the other thought, that the surrender must be to God.

There is no need for my dwelling at any length on the various practical directions in which this great exhortation must be wrought out. It is of more importance, by far, to have well fixed in our minds and hearts the one dominant thought that sacrifice is the keyword of the Christian life than to explain the directions in which it applies. But still, just a word or two about these. There are three ways in which we may look at the body, which the Apostle here says is to be yielded up unto God.

It is the recipient of impressions from without. There is a field for consecration. The eye that looks upon evil, and by the look has rebellious, lustful, sensuous, foul desires excited in the heart, breaks this solemn law. The eye that among the things seen dwells with complacency on the pure, and turns from the impure as if a hot iron had been thrust into its pupil; that in the things seen discerns shimmering behind them, and manifested through them, the things unseen and eternal, is the consecrated eye. Art for Art's sake, to quote the cant of the day, has too often meant art for the flesh's sake. And there are pictures and books, and sights of various sorts, flashed before the eyes of you young men and women which it is pollution to dwell upon, and should be pain to remember. I beseech you all to have guard over these gates of the heart, and to pray, Turn away mine eyes from viewing vanity. And the other senses, in like manner, have need to be closely connected with God if they are not to rush us down to the devil.

The body is not only the recipient of impressions. It is the possessor of appetites and necessities. See to it that these are indulged, with constant reference to God. It is no small attainment of the Christian life to eat our meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God. In a hundred directions this characteristic of our corporeal lives tends to lead us all away from supreme consecration to Him. There is the senseless luxury of this generation. There is the exaggerated care for physical strength and completeness amongst the young; there is the intemperance in eating and drinking, which is the curse and the shame of England. There is the provision for the flesh, the absorbing care for the procuring of material comforts, which drowns the spirit in miserable anxieties, and makes men bond-slaves. There is the corruption which comes from drunkenness and from lust. There is the indolence which checks lofty aspirations and stops a man in the middle of noble work. And there are many other forms of evil on which I need not dwell, all of which are swept clean out of the way when we lay to heart this injunction: I beseech you present your bodies a living sacrifice, and let appetites and tastes and corporeal needs be kept in rigid subordination and in conscious connection with Him. I remember a quaint old saying of a German schoolmaster, who apostrophised his body thus: I go with you three times a day to eat; you must come with me three times a day to pray. Subjugate the body, and let it be the servant and companion of the devout spirit.

It is also, besides being the recipient of impressions, and the possessor of needs and appetites, our instrument for working in the world. And so the exhortation of my text comes to include this, that all our activities done by means of brain and eye and tongue and hand and foot shall be consciously devoted to Him, and laid as a sacrifice upon His altar. That pervasive, universally diffused reference to God, in all the details of daily life, is the thing that Christian men and women need most of all to try to cultivate. Pray without ceasing, says the Apostle. This exhortation can only be obeyed if our work is indeed worship, being done by God's help, for God's sake, in communion with God.

So, dear friends, sacrifice is the keynote--meaning thereby surrender, control, and stimulus of the corporeal frame, surrender to God, in regard to the impressions which we allow to be made upon our senses, to the indulgence which we grant to our appetites, and the satisfaction which we seek for our needs, and to the activities which we engage in by means of this wondrous instrument with which God has trusted us. These are the plain principles involved in the exhortation of my text. He that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption. I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection. It is a good servant; it is a bad master.

**II. Note, secondly, the relation between this priestly service and other kinds of worship.**

I need only say a word about that. Paul is not meaning to depreciate the sacrificial ritual, from which he drew his emblem. But he is meaning to assert that the devotion of a life, manifested through bodily activity, is higher in its nature than the symbolical worship of any altar and of any sacrifice. And that falls in with prevailing tendencies in this day, which has laid such a firm hold on the principle that daily conduct is better than formal worship, that it has forgotten to ask the question whether the daily conduct is likely to be satisfactory if the formal worship is altogether neglected. I believe, as profoundly as any man can, that the true worship is distinguishable from and higher than the more sensuous forms of the Catholic or other sacramentarian churches, or the more simple of the Puritan and Nonconformist, or the altogether formless of the Quaker. I believe that the best worship is the manifold activities of daily life laid upon God's altar, so that the division between things secular and things sacred is to a large extent misleading and irrelevant. But at the same time I believe that you have very little chance of getting this diffused and all-pervasive reference of all a man's doings to God unless there are, all through his life, recurring with daily regularity, reservoirs of power, stations where he may rest, kneeling-places where the attitude of service is exchanged for the attitude of supplication; times of quiet communion with God which shall feed the worshipper's activities as the white snowfields on the high summits feed the brooks that sparkle by the way, and bring fertility wherever they run. So, dear brethren, remember that whilst life is the field of worship there must be the inward worship within the shrine if there is to be the outward service.

**III. Lastly, note the equally comprehensive motive and ground of this all-inclusive directory for conduct.**

I beseech you, by the mercies of God. That plural does not mean that the Apostle is extending his view over the whole wide field of the divine beneficence, but rather that he is contemplating the one all-inclusive mercy about which the former part of his letter has been eloquent--viz. the gift of Christ--and contemplating it in the manifoldness of the blessings which flow from it. The mercies of God which move a man to yield himself as a sacrifice are not the diffused beneficences of His providence, but the concentrated love that lies in the person and work of His Son.

And there, as I believe, is the one motive to which we can appeal with any prospect of its being powerful enough to give the needful impetus all through a life. The sacrifice of Christ is the ground on which our sacrifices can be offered and accepted, for it was the sacrifice of a death propitiatory and cleansing, and on it, as the ancient ritual taught us, may be reared the enthusiastic sacrifice of a life--a thankoffering for it.

Nor is it only the ground on which our sacrifice is accepted, but it is the great motive by which our sacrifice is impelled. There is the difference between the Christian teaching, present your bodies a sacrifice, and the highest and noblest of similar teaching elsewhere. One of the purest and loftiest of the ancient moralists was a contemporary of Paul's. He would have re-echoed from his heart the Apostle's directory, but he knew nothing of the Apostle's motive. So his exhortations were powerless. He had no spell to work on men's hearts, and his lofty teachings were as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Whilst Seneca taught, Rome was a cesspool of moral putridity and Nero butchered. So it always is. There may be noble teachings about self-control, purity, and the like, but an evil and adulterous generation is slow to dance to such piping.

Our poet has bid us--

Move upwards, casting out the beast,

And let the ape and tiger die.

But how is this heavy bulk of ours to move upwards; how is the beast to be cast out; how are the ape and tiger in us to be slain? Paul has told us, By the mercies of God. Christ's gift, meditated on, accepted, introduced into will and heart, is the one power that will melt our obstinacy, the one magnet that will draw us after it.

Nothing else, brethren, as your own experience has taught you, and as the experience of the world confirms, nothing else will bind Behemoth, and put a hook in his nose. Apart from the constraining motive of the love of Christ, all the cords of prudence, conscience, advantage, by which men try to bind their unruly passions and manacle the insisting flesh, are like the chains on the demoniac's wrists--And he had oftentimes been bound by chains, and the chains were snapped asunder. But the silken leash with which the fair Una in the poem leads the lion, the silken leash of love will bind the strong man, and enable us to rule ourselves. If we will open our hearts to the sacrifice of Christ, we shall be able to offer ourselves as thankofferings. If we will let His love sway our wills and consciences, He will give our wills and consciences power to master and to offer up our flesh. And the great change, according to which He will one day change the body of our humiliation into the likeness of the body of His glory, will be begun in us, if we live under the influence of the motive and the commandment which this Apostle bound together in our text and in his other great words, Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body and spirit, which are His.