

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“DIG IN”
(Romans 12:1)

Pastor John Hart

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“Paul tells his readers that their proper response to God is the shaping of their total lives by His gracious will. Like the burnt offering given wholly to God, the Christian is to be a total sacrifice to God, and that sacrifice is to consist of the whole of life. That, says Paul, is the logical response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ.”

(Paul Achtemeier)

What do we do when we worship? Or better, what do *you* do when you’re at worship? What is worship for you?

Well, I suppose there are dozens of ways to answer that question.

- For some of us, Sunday worship is the time we reserve to focus on our relationship with God.
- For some of us, worship is the time we connect with other people to testify *together* to our faith in God.
- For some of us, worship is the time we get inspired, or where we find comfort, or when we are challenged.
- For some of us, we worship because we want to be able to answer the question asked at the end, “What has God said to me this morning?”

Here’s a related question: What is it that *motivates* you to come here to Liberty to worship? Again, lots of different ways to answer.

- Some of us come to worship because we believe it’s the right thing to do.
- Some of us come to worship because it’s what’s expected of us.
- Some of us come here to resolve, again, to be God’s person in the coming week.
- Some of come to worship because we still hear our mother’s voice in the back of our heads, guilting us into being here.
- Some of us come here to get re-connected, to get re-centered, with God.

Whatever we do when we’re in worship, and whatever motivates us to be here to worship, we all understand that these 60 minutes isn’t all there is, that worship isn’t a once a week exercise. That we’re not “Sunday Christians”, but we want to be able to connect what happens here on Sunday with our lives over the next seven days.

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Our Scripture passage this morning comes from the twelfth chapter of Paul's *Letter to the Romans*.

It's usually helpful to identify the context of a Bible passage in order to understand it, and for today's passage the context is critical.

Here's the context: In the previous eleven chapters, Paul has been laying out, in great detail and with great urgency, his understanding of the Gospel. *Romans* is one of the last letters Paul wrote, and so it reveals Paul's mature, developed reflection on the message he's been preaching for the past 25 years.

Paul spends chapters one through eleven explaining the Gospel:

- about God's faithfulness and our faithlessness,
- about God's righteousness and our sin,
- about God's love and our lostness.

But mostly, Paul talks about Jesus and what God has accomplished for us in him, how Jesus is God's Good News:

- Paul writes that *"Because of the free gift of God's grace, we are now all put right with God through Christ ... God offered Jesus, so that by his death he should be the sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven ... In the past God was patient and overlooked our sins; but now, in Jesus, he has dealt with our sin"* (3:22-26).
- Paul goes on to state that through faith we become united to Christ, such that we have died to our old way of living and have been raised into a whole new kind of life.
- And Paul talks about the unrelenting faithfulness of God to His people no matter what.

And he sums up his Gospel like this:

What can we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't God, who gave us Christ, also give us everything else? Who will accuse God's people? God himself declares them not guilty!

Then can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? ... No. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep us from God's love. For I am certain that ... there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:31-39)

And then we turn to chapter 12. If the first eleven chapters are about what God has done for us in Jesus, Paul now turns to the next question: What, then, should we do for God? Paul has many specific things to say in next four chapters, but he sums

them all up right at the beginning, in one amazing verse. Listen to God's word from chapter twelve of Paul's *Letter to the Romans*:

Therefore, my friends, in light of God's great mercy to us, I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the logical worship that you should offer.

“Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him.” Paul describes the Christian life by using a worship metaphor. It's a very compact metaphor, but it's a very powerful metaphor. Paul is saying: God has offered Himself as a sacrifice for us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the only logical response is for us to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices.

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To understand what Paul's driving at, it's helpful to remember when Paul thinks about worship – while that includes believers assembling together for prayer and praise and singing and teaching – most specifically Paul's worship metaphor draws on the central part of worship: the offering.

Now, he's not talking about passing the plate or sending in pledge cards. Paul's thinking about *Old Testament* offerings – sacrifices. It's all laid out in considerable detail in the book of *Leviticus*, the biblical book that is infamous for de-railing the best intentions of Christians who resolve, “This year, I'm going to sit down and read the Bible straight through from cover to cover”, because most of them fly through *Genesis* and do pretty well through *Exodus*, but reading *Leviticus* is like running full speed into a brick wall.

In the midst of the abundant detail we find about sacrifices in *Leviticus*, we find two things about offerings that Paul assumes to be fundamental when he tells us to offer ourselves as “living sacrifices”.

The first is this: when you make an offering to God, you always offer God your *best*:

When you present grain as an offering to the LORD, the offering must consist of choice flour (2:1)

When anyone presents a burnt offering, ... the animal must not have any defects. ... If you offer any animal that has defects, the LORD will not accept it. ... Don't offer to the LORD any animal that is blind or crippled or injured. (22:19-22)

When we worship God through our offerings, we offer our best.

And second, when you make an offering to God, offer *all of it*, holding nothing back:

When you offer an animal sacrifice ... [the priests] will arrange the pieces of the offering ... on the wood burning on the altar. ... Then the priest will burn the entire sacrifice on the altar as a burnt offering. It is a special gift, a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (1:7-9)

An offering isn't a token, it isn't a gesture – it's the whole thing. So when you give, give it all.

You see, both *Leviticus* and Paul agree on this point: our worship is acceptable when it corresponds to the God we're worshipping. And the God we worship – He has given His best to us in Jesus; He has given us His all in Jesus.

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"In light of God's great mercy to us, I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God."

If Paul's words are going to capture our imaginations, it's critical that we re-think our understanding of the key word "sacrifice." Because none of us is particularly excited about sacrificing. When you highlight "sacrifice" and click on "Thesaurus" in Microsoft Word, here's what you get:

- As a noun, sacrifice means: expense, detriment, disadvantage, cost, loss, martyr, ransom, victim,
- As a verb, to sacrifice means: forgo, forfeit, surrender, lose

And this isn't helpful! Because Paul is *not* saying to us: "Offer yourselves to God as a living *victim*." He's *not* saying: "Offer yourselves to God as a living *loss*." He's *not* saying, "*Forfeit* yourselves to God." In the Bible, "sacrifice" doesn't carry all these negative connotations. Because in the Bible, offering sacrifice is the very heart of worship. And the heart of worship is not to *lose* but to *give*, it's not to *forfeit* but to *benefit*. In our worship, we offer a sacrifice in the spirit of Psalm 116:12:

"What can I offer the LORD for all he has done for me?"

In other words, our offering – our sacrifice – is our answer to the question: "What can I do that adequately and accurately reflects my gratitude?" And Paul provides the answer: Offer yourself as a living sacrifice. Offer your life to God – once-for-all and every day – in joy, in love, in service.

Because, Paul concludes, "this is your logical worship." Offering ourselves to God is the logical thing to do, it's the reasonable thing to do, it's the sensible thing to do. How else can we respond to God's self-giving grace and love other than to respond in self-giving love and service? Any other response – half-hearted, distracted, superficial, intermittent, sluggish, reluctant – it just doesn't make any

sense. One Bible scholar puts it this way, in the quote I've put on the cover of the bulletin:

“Paul tells his readers that their proper response to God is the shaping of their total lives by His gracious will. Like the burnt offering given wholly to God, the Christian is to be a total sacrifice to God, and that sacrifice is to consist of the whole of life. That, says Paul, is the logical response to God's grace in Jesus Christ.”¹ (Paul Achtemeier)

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This year, our stewardship theme is “Dig into Liberty”, by which we mean – invest yourself in God's work in and through this church.

There are so many ways to match your time and interests and gifts and passions with the ministries and missions at Liberty. It goes without saying that we need you to dig into these ministries and missions so that Liberty will thrive.

But even more, we need you to dig in so that your life will be transformed, that your story at Liberty will also be a story of “God is changing lives at Liberty”.

Yes, this includes a financial investment. But the call is to invest *yourself* in God, offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God and His redemptive work at Liberty Church.

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Therefore, my friends, in light of God's great mercy to us, I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the logical worship that you should offer.

“Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice.” “Dig into Liberty.” It's the exact opposite of “going through the motions”. It's an offering of time and talent and treasure, an offering of body and soul, an offering of heart and mind – our best, our all, to God. AMEN

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¹ Paul Achtemeier, *Romans* (Interpretation) (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1995), p. 195.