

Letters from Paul – Session Eleven

Dear Romans: Sacrifice and Sin Circa 2020

Romans 12:1-2

One thing Baptists just don't talk enough about is sin. Ha! We all know that's a joke, especially if you are of my generation.

Growing up we were fed a generous diet of sin and sin's consequences. There were revival services when you could all but smell the brimstone burning, although most of us had no idea what brimstone was.

That said, it's also not a good idea to downplay/underplay sin. Sin is an affront to God and a constant drag on our spiritual lives. Our salvation covers our sin penalty but does not remove the presence of sin in our lives. We will still sin. The key is to sin less (and less). How does one sin less? Possibly the best way is to focus less on sin/sins (individual acts) and more on our sin condition.

Each of us was born with a sin condition that results in acts/actions we call sin(s). Too often we fixate on the acts, the individual sins and not on what led to the acts. To try to sin less by, well, sinning less, in tantamount to putting a band-aid on a gaping wound.

Mary Hinkle Shore writes:

Sin, in the singular, is a power in Paul's thought. It is the bully on the playground that enthralls everyone, gathering devotees, terrorizing would-be opponents into silence, enslaving all. Sin vies with the Creator for control of humanity and the rest of creation to such an extent that Paul can speak of our having been "enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:6).

Note the reference to Paul's "enslaved to sin" comment. We are indeed slaves to sin, sin as a condition and not as individual acts.

Barbara Brown Taylor assists us with her words:

"Contrary to the legal model, sin is not simply a set of behaviors to be avoided. Much more fundamentally, it is a way of life to be exposed and changed, and no one is innocent."

This way of life or condition that must be dealt with is a repair job. She elaborates:

“The choice to enter into a process of repair is called repentance, an often-bitter medicine with the undisputed power to save lives.”

Each of us were in need of repair, in need of being fixed, when we accepted God’s salvation and presence in our lives. This process of repair is a life-long endeavor and helps us understand the true definition of salvation. Properly defined salvation is “I am saved, I am being saved, I will be saved.”

In reality this process is an eternal one. “I am saved” began when we allowed God into our lives; “I am being saved” is our earthly lives afterward; and, “I will be saved” is what plays out in the afterlife.

So, how do we pull this off? How do we attend to our ongoing sin condition and as a result sin less and less (which will make us a better lifestyle witness?) Ah, glad you asked. Paul helps us with this in Romans 12: 1-8 and it begins with sacrificing ourselves. Huh? That seems rather severe. It’s not. It makes sense after you get past the thoughts conjured up by “sacrifice” as a verb.

Paul writes: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship* (Romans 12: 1).

Some translations read, *which is your spiritual act of worship*. It’s a minor variation but one that assists in our better understanding all that Paul was saying here. Spiritual worship is what we do well, but this is not what Paul had in mind. A deeper take might see the need for having a symbolic practical view that would lead to both theological and direct application. **What?**

Spiritual worship is what we pursue and a spiritual act is the result. Rather than inanimate offerings like grain and animal sacrifices Paul seeks a daily refreshing and renewal encounter with God. Our primary worship focus therefore must be with God on a very regular basis. We are privy to both fresh mercies and new grace every day.

And let’s be clear: Paul was not talking about sacrificing our “body” in a literal sense. God accomplished that when he came as Jesus. The heavy lifting has been done. Our sacrifice (let’s admit it should be a daily event) is to choose to seek

holiness/righteousness by not allowing the natural/worldly/pre-faith former “us” to have control. We sacrifice that reality for the new, faithful, Spirit-filled life in God.

So, when we renew our relationship with God each day, we are indeed presenting ourselves as fresh sacrifices, which Paul says is our spiritual worship. By engaging in a renewal process with God each day we are committing an act of worship. It could be said it is the only on-going sacrificial element in our theology.

Takeaway: If we initiate a renewal process each day, we will be moving forward in a progressive way that will lead to maturity. This will also keep us moving in the direction God moves.

God’s Kingdom is progressive. It will continue to progress with us or without us. If we are mired in a tugging match between our old/former/unsaved selves and our redeemed new lives... we won’t be beneficial to God’s plans.

And, if we successfully renew and reboot our faith lives each day, we will be in a position to promote the new-life-reality of living in concert with God.

Imagine how many people are struggling to make sense of the harshness and inequity of today’s Pandemic existence. People are giving up hope and they need to see a fresh witness of the life they could achieve in Christ. We can be that example for the struggling masses. Actually, that’s our job!

Amen and Amen

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