

## 244 Living Sacrifice and Sweet-Smelling Savour

We have been considering how our membership of “the household of God”, “the body of Christ”, the local church community, involves each of us using the various spiritual gifts entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4.12). Some of these gifts are applicable for use in times of corporate worship, while others will be in action in all sorts of ways in the wider ongoing ministry of the local church. The net effect of the use of these many gifts is that this local “body of Christ” is on course to be healthy, balanced and effective in its tasks.

This state of overall health still depends upon each of its members remaining spiritually “on course” in themselves, for obviously a healthy church comprising spiritually-unhealthy members is an impossibility. In Romans 12.1 the Holy Spirit gives us that well-known instruction – “present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, well-pleasing to God (which is) your reasonable service” (JPGreen Literal); that phrase “a living sacrifice” can trip off the tongue without a second thought, but it has immense significance!

The Lord God gave to His covenant people the children of Israel the highly elaborate system of animal sacrifices. This served as a constant, very vivid illustration of their helpless spiritual state if left to themselves: their fallenness and sinfulness before this holy God their Creator, for which the righteous punishment was the shedding of their own blood; the perpetual shedding of this innocent animal blood on their behalf, in their place, which God in His mercy accepted for a time as achieving a token-forgiveness for their sins; all of which steadily pointed forward to the shedding of the blood of God’s own Son, the Lamb of God, who “upon the cross for our redemption ... made there, by His one oblation once offered, a full perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world (as described in the Prayer of Consecration in the 1662 Prayer Book Communion Service / see also eg., Hebrews 9.1-28).

Now here in Romans 12 we are urged to be a “living sacrifice” ourselves in our dealings with the Lord and with one another. So this is not only a call to die to ourselves, but is also a paradox – we are to remain living all the time in this state of self-dying. This sacrificing of ourselves means we relegate our own interests below those of the Lord God Himself and those of one another. Coming to mind are the two great commandments – Deuteronomy 6.4-5 / Leviticus 19.18 / Matthew 22.34-40 – God first, then others, then self, in that order; also the humility running through the “Beatitudes” (Matthew 5.2-12); as well as the Lord washing His disciples’ feet (John 13.1-15), followed by His words, “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15.12).

So there it is, crystal clear! – and much of the Lord’s teaching in both the Gospels and the Epistles is about what this state of our being “living sacrifices” is to mean in practice. The volume of practical instruction we are given within Scripture about this obligation shows that the Lord Himself knows full well that this is far from easy, for of course it flies smack in the face of that other trinity – Me, Myself and I.

But as always, where the Lord calls, He equips (egs., think of many Old Testament characters / Matthew 7.7-8 / Mark 10.27 / John 15.5 / Phil 1.6 and 4.19 / Col 3.17 / Hebrews 12.1-2 / ....). The more we can live hour by hour remaining consciously in the presence of the Lord, seeking His wishes and interests, the easier it becomes to keep our own interests at the back of the queue.

We close with a lovely feature of those Old Testament sacrifices – they provided “a sweet-smelling savour to the Lord” – a phrase found over thirty times in Leviticus and Numbers alone. The Lord was blessed by those sacrifices, for they involved the voluntary offering of obedience and worship by His people, and their recognition of the true relationship between themselves and the living God, a relationship based solely on the grace and love of God towards them.

Just so with us. May our often-feeble efforts at being “living sacrifices” before the Lord and one another have something about them of that “sweet-smelling savour to the Lord” – obedience, worship and gratitude. As John the Baptist humbly said as he gave way before the Lord Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3.30), and that is our calling and privilege too.

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