

Martin Luther

Sermon

A Living Sacrifice

Romans Chapter 12:1-6

First Sunday After Epiphany, 1525.

Martin Luther preached on Romans 12:1-6 for the **First Sunday after Epiphany** in his *Church Postil* sermons, with the published sermon dating specifically to **1525**.

Date/Occasion: First Sunday After Epiphany, 1525.

Context: This sermon is part of his "Epistle Sermons" (Church Postil) and focuses on "The Fruits of Faith" or "Our Spiritual Service".

Key Themes: In this sermon, Luther focused on the dedication of the body as a "living sacrifice," love, unity, and the proper use of spiritual gifts, differentiating this practical application from his previous academic lectures on Romans.

While Luther lectured on the entire book of Romans between 1515 and 1516, this specific sermon text (Rom 12:1-6) was compiled and published as part of his 1525 postils. (AI)

1 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.

2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office:

5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith;

In the preceding sermons I have treated sufficiently of faith and love; and of crosses and afflictions, the promoters of hope. Faith, love and affliction bound the

Christian's life. It is unnecessary that I should further discourse on these topics. As they, or anything pertaining to the life of the Christian, present themselves, reference may be had to those former postils. It is my purpose now briefly to make plain that the sum of all divine doctrine is simply Jesus Christ, as we have often heard.

This epistle lesson treats not of faith, but of the fruits of faith, love, unity, patience, self-denial, etc. Among these fruits, the apostle considers first the discipline of the body, the mortification of evil lusts. He handles the subject here in a manner wholly unlike his method in other epistles.

In Galatians he speaks of crucifying the flesh with its lusts.

in Hebrews and Colossians, of putting off the old man and mortifying the members on earth.

Here he mentions presenting the body as a sacrifice; he dignifies it by the loftiest and most sacred terms. Why does he so?

First, by making the terms glorious, he would the more emphatically urge us to yield this fruit of faith. The whole world regards the priest's office, his service and his dignity, as representing the acme of nobility and exaltation; and so, it truly does.

Now, if one would be a priest and exalted before God, let him set about this work of offering up his body to God; in other words, let him be humble, let him be nothing in the eyes of the world.

I will let every man decide for himself the difference between the outward priesthood of dazzling character and the internal, spiritual priesthood.

The first is confined to a very few individuals;

the second, Christians commonly share.

One was ordained of men, independently of the Word of God;

the other was established through the Word, irrespective of human devices.

In that, the skin is besmeared with material oil; in this, the heart is internally anointed with the Holy Spirit.

That applauds and extols its works; this proclaims and magnifies the grace of God, and his glory.

That does not offer up the body with its lusts, but rather fosters the evil desires of the flesh; this sacrifices the body and mortifies its lusts.

The former permits the offering up to itself of gold and property, of honour, of idleness and pleasure, and of all manner of lust on earth; the latter foregoes these things and accepts only the reverse of homage.

That again sacrifices Christ in its awful perversions; this, satisfied with the atonement once made by Christ, offers up itself with him and in him, by making similar sacrifices.

In fact, the two priesthoods accord about as well as Christ and Barabbas, as light and darkness, as God and the world. As little as smearing and shaving were factors in Christ's priesthood, so little will they thus procure for anyone the Christian priesthood.

Yet Christ, with all his Christians, is priest. "Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." Ps 110, 4. The Christian priesthood will not admit of appointment.

The priest is not made. He must be born a priest; must inherit his office. I refer to the new birth, the birth of water and the Spirit.

Thus, all Christians become priests, children of God and co-heirs with Christ the Most High Priest.

Men universally consider the title of priest glorious and honourable; it is acceptable to everyone. But the duties and the sacrifice of the office are rarely accepted. Men seem to be averse to these latter. **The Christian priesthood costs life, property, honour, friends and all worldly things.** It cost Christ the same on the holy cross. No man readily chooses death instead of life, and accepts pain instead of pleasure, loss instead of gain, shame rather than honour, enemies rather than friends, according to the example Christ set for us on the cross. And further, all this is to be endured, not for profit to one's self, but for the benefit of his neighbour and for the honour and glory of God. For so Christ offered up his body. This priesthood is a glorious one.

As I have frequently stated, the suffering and work of Christ is to be viewed in two lights: First, as grace bestowed on us, as a blessing conferred, requiring the exercise of faith on our part and our acceptance of the salvation offered. Second, we are to regard it an example for us to follow; we are to offer up ourselves for our neighbours' benefit and for the honour of God. This offering is the exercise of our love-- distributing our works for the benefit of our neighbours. He who so does is a Christian. He becomes one with Christ, and the offering of his body is identical with the offering of Christ's body. This is what Peter calls offering sacrifices acceptable to God by Christ. He describes priesthood and offering in these words: "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." 1 Pet 2, 5.

Peter says "spiritual sacrifices," but Paul says our bodies are to be offered up. While it is true that the body is not spirit, the offering of it is called a spiritual sacrifice because it is freely sacrificed through the Spirit, the Christian being uninfluenced by the constraints of the Law or the fear of hell. Such motives, however, sway the ecclesiasts, who have heaped tortures upon themselves by undergoing fasts, uncomfortable clothing, vigils, hard beds and other vain and difficult performances, and yet failed to attain to this spiritual sacrifice. Rather, they have wandered the farther from it because of their neglect to mortify their old Adam-like nature. They have but increased in presumption and wickedness, thinking by their works and merits to raise themselves in God's estimation. Their penances were not intended for the mortification of their bodies, but as works meriting for them superior seats in heaven. Properly, then, their efforts may be regarded a carnal sacrifice of their bodies, unacceptable to God and most acceptable to the devil.

But spiritual sacrifices, Peter tells us, are acceptable to God; and Paul teaches the same (Rom 8, 13): "If by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live." Paul speaks of mortifying through the Spirit; Peter, of a spiritual sacrifice. The offering must first be slain. Paul's thought is: "If ye mortify the deeds of the body in

your individual, chosen ways, unprompted by the Spirit or your own heart, simply through fear of punishment, that mortification--that sacrifice--will be carnal; and ye shall not live, but die a death the more awful." The Spirit must mortify your deeds--spiritually it must be done; that is, with real enjoyment, unmoved by fear of hell, voluntarily, without expectation of meriting honor or reward, either temporal or eternal. This, mark you, is a spiritual sacrifice. However outward, gross, physical and visible a deed may be, it is altogether spiritual when wrought by the Spirit. Even eating and drinking are spiritual works if done through the Spirit. On the other hand, whatsoever is wrought through the flesh is carnal, no matter to what extent it may be a secret desire of the soul. Paul (Gal 5, 20) terms idolatry and heresies works of the flesh, notwithstanding they are invisible impulses of the soul.

In addition to this spiritual sacrifice--the mortifying of the deeds of the body--Peter mentions another, later on in the same chapter: "But ye are ... a royal priesthood ... that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Here Peter touches upon the preaching office, the real sacrificial office, concerning which it is said (Ps 50, 23), "Whoso offereth the sacrifice of thanksgiving glorifieth me." Preaching extols the grace of God. It is the offering of praise and thanks. Paul boasts (Rom 15, 16) that he sanctifies and offers the Gospel. But it is not our purpose to consider here this sacrifice of praise; though praise in the congregation may be included in the spiritual sacrifice, as we shall see. For he who offers his body to God also offers his tongue and his lips as instruments to confess, preach and extol the grace of God. On this topic, however, we shall speak elsewhere. Let us now consider the words of the text.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren."

Paul does not say, "I command you." He is preaching to those already godly Christians through faith in the new man; to hearers who are not to be constrained by commandments, but to be admonished. For the object is to secure voluntary renunciation of their old, sinful, Adam-like nature. He who will not cheerfully respond to friendly admonition is no Christian. And he who attempts by the restraints of law to compel the unwilling to renunciation, is no Christian preacher or ruler; he is but a worldly jailer.

"By the mercies of God."

A teacher of the Law enforces his restraints through threats and punishments. A preacher of grace persuades and incites by calling attention to the goodness and mercy of God. The latter does not desire works prompted by an unwilling spirit, or service that is not the expression of a cheerful heart. He desires that a joyous, willing spirit shall incite to the service of God. He who cannot, by the gracious and lovely message of God's mercy so lavishly bestowed upon us in Christ, be persuaded in a spirit of love and delight to contribute to the honor of God and the benefit of his neighbor, is worthless to Christianity, and all effort is lost on him. How can one

whom the fire of heavenly love and grace cannot melt, be rendered cheerfully obedient by laws and threats? Not human mercy is offered us, but divine mercy, and Paul would have us perceive it and be moved thereby.

"To present your bodies."

Many and various were the sacrifices of the Old Testament. But all were typical of this one sacrifice of the body, offered by Christ and his Christians. And there is not, nor can be, any other sacrifice in the New Testament. What more would one, or could one, offer than himself, all he is and all he has? When the body is yielded a sacrifice, all belonging to the body is yielded also. Therefore, the Old Testament sacrifices, with the priests and all the splendour, have terminated. How does the offering of a penny compare with that of the body? Indeed, such fragmentary patchwork scarcely deserves recognition as a sacrifice when the bodies of Christ and of his followers are offered.

Consequently, Isaiah may truly say that in the New Testament such beggarly works are loathsome compared to real and great sacrifices: "He that killeth an ox is as he that slayeth a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as he that breaketh a dog's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as he that offereth swine's blood; he that burneth frankincense, as he that blesseth an idol." Is 66:3. Similarly, also: "What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices? saith Jehovah: I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats." Is 1:11. Thus, in plain words, Isaiah rejects all other sacrifices in view of this true one.

Our blind leaders, therefore, have most wretchedly deceived the world by their mass-offerings, for they have forgotten this one real sacrifice. The mass may be celebrated and at the same time the soul be not benefited, but rather injured. But the body cannot be offered without benefiting the soul. **Under the New Testament dispensation, then, the mass cannot be a sacrifice, even were it ever one. For all the works, all the sacrifices of the New Testament, must be true and soul-benefiting.** Otherwise, they are not New Testament sacrifices. It is said (Ps 25:10), "All the paths of Jehovah are lovingkindness and truth."

"A living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God."

Paul here makes use of the three words "living," "holy" and "acceptable," doubtless to teach that the sacrifices of the Old Testament are repealed and the entire priesthood abolished. The Old Testament sacrifices consisted of bullocks, sheep and goats. To these life was not spared. For the sacrifice they were slain, burned, consumed by the priests. But the New Testament sacrifice is a wonderful offering. Though slain, it still lives. Indeed, in proportion as it is slain and sacrificed, does it live in vigour. "If by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live." Rom 8:13. "For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." Col 3:3. "And they that are

of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts thereof." Gal 5:24.

The word "living," then, is to be spiritually understood as having reference to the life before God and not to the temporal life. He who keeps his body under and mortifies its lusts does not live to the world; he does not lead the life of the world. The world lives in its lusts, and according to the flesh; it is powerless to live otherwise. True, the Christian is bodily in the world, yet he does not live after the flesh. As Paul says (2 Cor 10:3), "Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh"; and again (Rom 8:1), "Who walk not after the flesh." Such a life is, before God, eternal, and a true, living sacrifice. Such mortification of the body and of its lusts, whether effected by voluntary discipline or by persecution, is simply an exercise in and for the life eternal.

None of the Old Testament sacrifices were holy except in an external and temporal sense until they were consumed. For the life of the animal was but temporal and external previous to the sacrifice. But the "living sacrifice" Paul mentions is righteous before God, and also externally holy. "Holy" implies simply, being designed for the service and the honour of God and employed of God. Hence, we must here understand the word "holy" as conveying the thought that we let God alone work in us and we be simply his holy instruments. As said in First Corinthians 6, 19-20, "Your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost ... and ye are not your own ... therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." Again (Gal 6:17), "I bear branded on my body the marks of Jesus." Now, he who performs a work merely for his own pleasure and to his own honour, profanes his sacrifice. So also do they who by their works seek to merit reward from God, whether temporal or eternal. The point of error is, they are not yet a slain sacrifice. The sacrifice cannot be holy unless it first lives; that is, unless it is slain before God, and slain in its own consciousness, and thus does not seek its own honour and glory.

The Old Testament sacrifices were not in themselves acceptable to God. Nor did they render man acceptable. But in the estimation of the world, before men, they were pleasing, even regarded highly worthy. Men thought thereby to render themselves well-pleasing in God's sight. But the spiritual sacrifice is, in man's estimation, the most repugnant and unacceptable of all things. It condemns, mortifies and opposes whatever, in man's judgment, is good and well-pleasing. For, as before stated, nature cannot do otherwise than to live according to the flesh, particularly to follow its own works and inventions. It cannot admit that all its efforts and designs are vain and worthy of mortification and of death. The spiritual sacrifice is acceptable to God, Paul teaches, however unacceptable it may be to the world. They who render this living, holy sacrifice are happy and assured of their acceptance with God; they know God requires the death of the lusts and inventions of the flesh, and he alone desires to live and work in us.

Consequently, Paul's use of the word "body" includes more than outward, sensual vices and crimes, as gluttony, fornication, murder; it includes everything not of the new spiritual birth but belonging to the old Adam nature, even its best and noblest faculties, outer and inner; the deep depravity of self-will, for instance, and arrogance, human wisdom and reason, reliance on our own good works, on our own spiritual life and on the gifts wherewith God has endowed our nature.

To illustrate: Take the most spiritual and the wisest individuals on earth, and while it is true that a fraction of them are outwardly and physically chaste, their hearts, it will be found, are filled with haughtiness, presumption and self-will, while they delight in their own wisdom and peculiar conduct. No saint is wholly free from the deep depravity of the inner nature. Hence, he must constantly offer himself up, mortifying his old deceitful self. Paul calls it sacrificing the body, because the individual, on becoming a Christian, lives more than half spiritually, and the evil propensities remaining to be mortified Paul attributes to the body as to the inferior, the less important, part of man; the part not as yet wholly under the Spirit's influence.

"Which is your spiritual (reasonable) service."

A clear distinction is here made between the services rendered God by Christians and those which the Jews rendered. The thought is: The Jews' service to God consisted in sacrifices of irrational beasts, but the service of Christians, in spiritual sacrifices, the sacrifice of their bodies, their very selves. The Jews offered gold and silver; they built an inanimate temple of wood and stone. Christians are a different people. Their sacrifices are not silver and gold. Their temple is not wood and stone; it is themselves. "Ye are a temple of God." 1 Cor 3:16. Thus you observe the unfair treatment accorded Christians in ignoring their peculiar services and inducing the world to build churches, to erect altars and monasteries, and to manufacture bells, chalices and images by way of Christian service, works that would have been too burdensome for even the Jews.

In brief, this our reasonable service is rightly called a spiritual service of the heart, performed in the faith and the knowledge of God. Here Paul rejects all service not performed in faith as entirely unreasonable, even if rendered by the body and in outward act and having the appearance of great holiness and spiritual life. Such have been the works, offerings, monkery and stringent life of the Papists, performed without the knowledge of God, having no command of God and without spirit and heart. They have thought that so long as the works were performed, they must be pleasing to God, independent of their faith. Such was also the service of the Jews in their works and offerings, and of all who knew not Christ and were without faith. Hence, they were no better than the service and works of idolatrous and ignorant heathen.

"And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

As before said, the world cannot endure the sight or hearing of this living sacrifice; therefore, it opposes it on every side. With its provocations and threats, its enticements and persecutions, it has every advantage, aided by the fact that our minds and spirits are not occupied with that spiritual sacrifice, but we give place to the dispositions and inclinations of the world. We must be careful, then, to follow neither the customs of the world nor our own reason or plausible theories. We must constantly subdue our dispositions and control our wills, not obeying the dictates of reason and desire. Always we are to conduct ourselves in a manner unlike the way of the world. So shall we be daily changed, renewed in our minds. That is, we come each day to place greater value on the things condemned by human reason, by the world. Daily we prefer to be poor, sick and despised, to be fools and sinners, until ultimately, we regard death as better than life, foolishness as more precious than wisdom, shame nobler than honour, labour more blessed than wealth, and sin more glorious than human righteousness. Such a mind the world does not possess. The mind of the world is altogether unlike the Christian's. It not only continues unchanged and unrenewed in its old disposition but is obdurate and very old.

God's will is ever good and perfect, ever gracious; but it is not at all times so regarded of men. Indeed, human reason imagines it to be the evil, unfriendly, abominable will of the devil, because what reason esteems highest, best and holiest, God's will regards as nothing and worthy of death. Therefore, Christian experience must come to the rescue and decide. It must feel and prove, must test and ascertain, whether one is prompted by a sincere and gracious will. He who perseveres and learns in this way will go forward in his experience, finding God's will so gracious and pleasing he would not exchange it for all the world's wealth. He will discover that acceptance of God's will affords him more happiness, even in poverty, disgrace and adversity, than is the lot of any worldling in the midst of earthly honours and pleasures. He will finally arrive at a degree of perfection making him inclined to exchange life for death, and, with Paul, to desire to depart that sin may no more live in him, and that the will of God may be done perfectly in himself in every relation. In this respect he is wholly unlike the world; he conducts himself very differently from it. For the world never has enough of this life, while the experienced Christian is ready to be removed. What the world seeks, he avoids; what it avoids, he seeks.

Paul, you will observe, does not consider the Christian absolutely free from sin, since he beseeches us to be "transformed by the renewing of the mind." Where transformation and renewal are necessary, something of the old and sinful nature must yet remain. This sin is not imputed to Christians, because they daily endeavour to effect transformation and renovation. Sin exists in them against their will. Flesh and spirit are contrary to each other (Gal 5:17), therefore we do not what we would. Rom 7:15.

Paul makes particular mention of "the mind" here, by contrast making plainer what is intended by the "body" which he beseeches them to sacrifice. The scriptural sense of the word "mind" has already been sufficiently defined as "belief," which is the source of either vice or virtue. For what I value, I believe to be right. I observe what I value, as do others. But when belief is wrong, conscience and faith have not control. Where unity of mind among men is lacking, love and peace cannot be present; and where love and faith are not present, only the world and the devil reign. Hence transformation by renewal of the mind is of vital importance. Now follows:

"For I say, through the grace that was given me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but so to think as to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man a measure of faith."

Paul, in all his epistles, is careful to give this instruction to Christians. His purpose is to preserve simplicity of faith among them everywhere; to prevent sects and schisms in Christian life, which have their origin in differing minds, in diversity of belief. To make admonition the more forcible, he refers to his apostolic office; to the fact that he was, by the grace of God, chosen and sent to teach the things he advocates. His words here mean: "Ye possess many graces but let everyone take heed to confine his belief and opinions to the limits of faith. Let him not esteem himself above another, nor attach to the gifts conferred upon himself greater value than he accords those conferred upon another. Otherwise, he will be inclined to despise the lesser gifts and emphasize the more exalted ones, and to influence others to the same practice." Where there is not such humility, recourse is had to works and to the honouring of gifts, while faith is neglected. Thus belief prompts to do as the world does, to value what is exalted and to despise what is humble.

This principle cannot be better illustrated than by the prevailing examples of our time. For instance, monks and priests have established spiritual orders which they regard highly meritorious. In this respect they do not think soberly, but extravagantly. They imagine ordinary Christians to be insignificant in comparison with them. But their orders represent neither faith nor love and are not commanded by God. They are peculiar, something devised by the monks and priests themselves. Hence there is division. Because of the different beliefs, numerous sects exist, each striving for first place. Consequently, all the orders become unprofitable in God's sight. The love and faith and harmony which unite Christians are dissipated.

Paul teaches that, however varied the gifts and the outward works, none should, because of these, esteem himself good, nor regard himself better than others. Rather, every man should estimate his own goodness by his faith. Faith is something all Christians have, though not in equal measure, some possessing more and others less. However, in faith all have the same possession, Christ. The murderer upon the cross, through faith, had Christ in himself as truly as had Peter, Paul, Abraham, the

mother of the Lord, and all saints; though his faith may not have been so strong. Therefore, though gifts be unequal, the precious faith is the same. Now, if we are to glory in the treasures of faith only, not in the gifts, every man should esteem another's gifts as highly as his own, and with his own gifts serve that other who in faith possesses equal treasure with him. Then will continue loving harmony and simple faith, and none will fall back upon his own works or merits.