

IN NOMINE JESU

What is the difference between a good sacrifice and a bad one?

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The text for today's sermon comes from Psalm 50, which we heard earlier in the service.

The Psalm for today talked a lot about sacrifices and, on the surface, it can seem kind of confusing. On one hand, there seem to be statements from God that talk positively about sacrifices, while at the same time, it seems that God is condemning at least a certain type of sacrifice.

We know that the sacrificial system was one set up by God way back in Genesis, and later there were different specifics commanded regarding sacrifice in different situations, so it can't be that sacrifice itself is necessarily bad.

Of course, as Christians we already know of at least one example of a good sacrifice. In fact, the sacrifice of Christ was the perfect sacrifice. When Christ died for us, it eclipsed every animal sacrifice in the whole Bible and covered us with His righteousness.

God performed this sacrifice once for all for us with the death of Christ, and it is this specific sacrifice that should be in our minds when we try to understand the command He has given us to sacrifice with prayers, offerings and thanksgiving.

While we don't sacrifice our crops and animals directly like the faithful have done in the past, the concept of commanded sacrifice continues with God's command for us to obey His Law, and do good works.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession says this:

Good works should be done because God has commanded them and in order to exercise our faith, to give testimony, and to render thanks.¹

These good works which we are commanded to do, these sacrifices we are commanded to make, they include everything we do to the glory of God. Whether we are a mother or father, husband or wife, child or worker; these are works that God has ordained for us to do, and by Christ's work, we have been freed to do those works.

So, now that we understand how Sacrifice from the times in the Old Testament is related to works that we do today as Christians, we can ask the question:

“What is the difference between a good sacrifice and a bad one?”

¹ Tappert, The Book of Concord, p.133.

Psalm 50 tells us this:

*Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;
your burnt offerings are continually before me.²*

God is giving a rebuke to people, but in this verse He says outright that the reason He is rebuking them is *not* because of the sacrifices themselves. So it isn't that sacrifice itself is bad, but there is something about their heart when they sacrifice that He despises.

The verse immediately after takes on a tone of condemnation, God says:

*I will not accept a bull from your house
or goats from your folds.
For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.³*

The distinction here lies in the details of what God is saying. "I will not accept a bull from *your* house.... For every beast of the forest is *mine*."

With these verses we start to see a picture of the abuses and unfaithfulness that these people are showing towards God.

The sacrifices are fine, yes, they're commanded by God, they are good things... but who is the one sacrificing something?

Is it the person who takes some of what they have, and give it to God? Are they allowing God to partake in their own riches?

When that person gives their time, energy, or personal property to God, they might feel like they are losing something they've worked hard to gather.

But Who gave them those things anyway? Who gave them their cattle, their bulls and their goats? Or their time, energy and ability?

That's right! God did!

So what sense does it make to say that this sacrifice that they are giving God is something that they own, that they have earned and that they are responsible for?

Can you imagine saying to God, "Here is a sacrifice, God. I worked really hard for it, but you can have some because I'm just so generous like that."

Instead of focusing on ourselves and how generous we are to give to God, our focus should be on God and the reason we have enough to spare in the first place.

² Psalm 50:8.

³ Psalm 50:9-10.

God reminds us of the source of these things. He says:

*For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the hills,
and all that moves in the field is mine.⁴*

God is responsible for every good thing that we have. We aren't doing God a favor by giving Him some of our time or our stuff. Our God, the living God is not like those ancient pagan gods of wood or stone that required things from their followers; blood, and meat, and bread, and wine.

God says this:

*“If I were hungry, I would not tell you,
for the world and its fullness are mine.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?”⁵*

God doesn't depend on us to sustain Himself. He doesn't require our offerings to be able to pay His bills. He doesn't need our food to keep from starving. We aren't the provider for God... God is the provider for us.

What was happening here, this thing that God was condemning, this was people taking the sacrifices commanded by God and turning them around. God's people weren't supposed to sacrifice to God because that action would magically appease His justice. These sacrifices and works weren't done by the faithful back then, or by us Christians today in order to bribe God or to solve any problem we created with our sin.

Instead, it is the other way around. God is the one who provides for us, who gives us what we need daily in our lives, and even more than we need.

When we do works for God, and when we sacrifice to God in our prayers and offerings, we are returning some of what He has graciously given us out of thanksgiving. We are showing that we acknowledge God as the source of all good things, and we are acting from our faith that God will continue to provide for us. With our sacrifices, we are reminding ourselves that we can trust God.

The question I asked at the beginning was “What is the difference between a good sacrifice and a bad one?”

⁴ Psalm 50:10-11, ESV.

⁵ Psalm 50:12-13, ESV.

To answer that, consider the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis, Chapter 4. This is what happened:

In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell.⁶

In this account we have two sacrifices: one which God has regard for, and one which God doesn't. Both brothers gave sacrifices, but there was some distinction there which we see clearly with how Cain responds.

For Abel, this sacrifice was something that God had given him being given back to God, but for Cain, the lack of regard for his sacrifice was something he took personally.

God provided both what Abel gave and what Cain gave, but Cain acted as though he deserved regard. He acted as though God owed *him* something and that his brother had cheated him out of the glory he deserved for his sacrifice. He acted as though God had taken something valuable from him and not given him the proper due; the proper regard.

Cain was not giving the sacrifice in faith, and as a result, this sacrifice was not accepted. Both Abel and Cain sacrificed, but it wasn't the act itself that appealed to God, it was the faith in God. Cain took some of what he had and gave it in sacrifice, but Abel took the best of what he had, trusting God to continue to provide.

This is the mistake many faithful have done over the thousands of years since then. They have taken something that should be used to glorify God and made it about themselves. They have given sacrifices, or done works without the faith that reminds them that it is actually God who is providing. It is God who gives the animal to sacrifice, and God who gives the ability to do good works.

These works and sacrifices done without faith are detestable to God. At best they are empty gestures, things we do because it's tradition or because it is expected of us; rote recitation of prayers a set number of times a day, putting money in the offering plate without so much as a thought about the source of that money. At worst, these can be acts of idolatry where we set ourselves up as the one giving, as the one doing, as the one who should get the credit.

⁶ Genesis 4:3-5.

These sacrifices, these works, these are *good* things. We have been freed in Christ by His sacrifice, and given a new heart as a result of His forgiveness, and with that freedom now we can give glory to God with the time and the possessions He has also given us!

Again the question is, “What is the difference between a good sacrifice and a bad one?”

A good sacrifice is one in which God is getting the glory. A good sacrifice is one in which we are acting out of thanksgiving, where we are remembering Christ’s sacrifice for us.

A bad sacrifice is one in which we get the glory, in which it’s “our” bull, or “our” goat, or “our” paycheck, or “our” time, talent and energy that is being given to God. A bad sacrifice is one in which we are acting because we think we have the power to appease God, or give Him something we alone are responsible for.

I’ll read again the quote from the Apology to the Augsburg Confession that I read at the beginning of the sermon:

*Good works should be done because God has commanded them and in order to exercise our faith, to give testimony, and to render thanks.*⁷

Compare that statement with what God says next in Psalm 50:

*Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
and perform your vows to the Most High,
and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.*”⁸

This is all about what God did for us, and what He promises to continue to do for us. We are free to give offerings and do works not as an empty action, or as one where we save ourselves, but as a sign of faith and thankfulness to God.

The point of sacrifice, in other words, is God, and what God has done for us. Every work and sacrifice ultimately points to the work of Christ and the sacrifice of His life on the cross for our sins.

Because of that one sacrifice we have been freed from sin and death, and given something we are able to recall with joy every time God gives us the opportunity to pray, praise, and give thanks.

And now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

1st Wednesday after Epiphany (Historic One-year series)

⁷ Tappert, The Book of Concord, p.133

⁸ Psalm 50:14-15.

Psalm 50:1-15; Malachi 4:1-6; Romans 15:4-13; Luke 21:25-36

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Solī Deo Gloria