

His Sacrifice and Ours
Romans 10:9-10, 12:1-2; Ephesians 5:1-2

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We are surrounded by signs (from Vacation Bible School) that say “God Is Wild about You!” And of course it is right that for children we stress the heart of the good news—that God loves you so much that he sent his Son so that you might have eternal life. But even with the children this week, we used the story of Peter’s denials to talk about what it means to follow Jesus versus turning your back on Jesus.

It is true to say that God’s love is unconditional, and it is right to say that we are saved by God’s grace. But the way God’s love expressed itself in Jesus was as an *invitation*—“Come follow me.” The sacrifice that Jesus made for us was an expression of his love for us while we were still sinners, yes. But *his* sacrifice calls for a sacrifice from *us*.

Jesus is in a sense the final sacrifice—an end to the old, old system of killing animals to make peace with God. Jesus’ death says to the world, “No more sacrifice! You are forgiven!” But as the apostle Paul points out, that sacrifice demands a response from us, and the only reasonable response is the offering of ourselves to God—not as dead, but as living. Instead of animals, we place our *lives* on the altar and give them to God so that God can make them holy and acceptable to him.

We do not place ourselves on the altar in place of animals and lie there looking up at God with puppy eyes asking, “Do you love me now? Am I being good?” No, the gospel *begins* with our hearing that we *are* loved as we are, that we *are* accepted, and that God has done everything necessary for our relationship with God to be made right.

But that knowledge is transforming. It doesn’t end with knowing. It calls for a response from us, which is to say “Thank you, thank you” and “I love you” and “I trust you with my life.” It calls for an expression of absolute loyalty—what Paul refers to as saying with your mouth, “Jesus is my Master.” I want to follow him and become like him.

On Thursday nights we’ve been reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book written in 1930’s Germany called *The Cost of Discipleship*. That book is an attack on the church of his day for reducing the gospel to the message that everything is OK with God. The gospel being preached, he said, lacked that element of invitation to follow; there was no call to respond to Jesus’ sacrifice with our own sacrifice. Bonhoeffer had a term for that: *cheap grace*, the idea that you can receive the goodies from Jesus without choosing to obey him. Here is what he wrote about its opposite, *costly grace*:

Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: “you were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.

What must we do to be saved? When people came to Jesus to ask how to have eternal life, the life of the kingdom, did Jesus ever say “Nothing! God loves you just the way you are”? No, Jesus said things like “Love God and love your neighbor.” He said “Give up your possessions and follow me,” “Love me more than your family and follow me,” “Leave your nets and follow me and I will make you fishers of people.”

Even when Jesus talked to Nicodemus in the famous John 3:16 story, Jesus' answer to the question of how to have eternal life is the *opposite* of "just stay the way you are." Jesus said to the religious leader, "You have to be *born* again, you have to start all over, you have to be changed completely by God's Spirit." How? By believing in Jesus—which does not mean just believing that he existed or that he was a manifestation of God; it means *trusting* completely in him to tell you how to live your life and entrusting yourself to his command in God's kingdom.

The Nicodemus story is written by John for people who no longer had the option of following Jesus literally. John's hearers years later couldn't just pick up their backpacks and head down to dusty road to be servants of Jesus. For people *after* Jesus rose from the dead—people like us—"following" is translated as believing and obeying. "If you love me," Jesus says in John's gospel, "you obey me." Blessed are people like us, Jesus says, who do not see him with our own eyes and yet choose to believe in him.

This is what Paul is getting at in the verses we read early in the service, Romans 10:9-10. How is it that the salvation that God accomplished on the cross becomes real in our lives? It begins when we believe in our hearts that Jesus rose from the dead. That's not simply believing in a miracle—it's believing that *God* raised Jesus from the dead *because* he is the Messiah, God's King who reigns forever. That's why Paul says almost the same thing in the other clause, in a form of Hebrew parallelism: the equivalent to believing that God raised Jesus from the dead is to declare with your mouth publicly "Jesus is Lord." *Jesus* is Lord, not Caesar, not Herod, not Money. Jesus is *my* Lord—I pledge my allegiance to him, to obey him. I am signing on to live the Jesus life and be a part of Jesus' continued life on earth in the church, which Paul calls the Messiah's *body*.

So it is never enough—for Jesus or Paul—for our response to Jesus' sacrifice to be *mere* belief or acceptance of cheap grace. As the hymn says, "Such love demands my soul, my all." If you really mean it when you say "Jesus is Lord," you are offering the direction of your life to him.

Paul expressed this in Romans 12 by saying that our response to God's mercy is to offer our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. What that means, he says, is not living by the values of the old regime—being full of yourself, seeking your own self-interest, arguing, being violent, getting drunk—but instead living by the values of Christ's new regime, the kingdom of love. Be not conformed but be *transformed*.

Jacques Ellul was a French Christian sociologist who worked with marginalized teenagers on the streets of Bordeaux in the 1950's and 60's. He always said that his goal was not to see these kids become well-adjusted to the normal patterns of society. That would make them conformists. Ellul said that his goal was to help the kids move from being "negatively maladjusted" to being "positively maladjusted." Martin Luther King said "There are some things in our world to which men of good will *must* be maladjusted." Don't be conformed to bigotry; don't get well-adjusted to oppression or militarism or violence, but be transformed.

If you wonder what *Paul* meant by being "transformed by the renewing of your mind," you only have to read the rest of Romans 12. What it means is learning not to live selfishly but as part of a community of people who share their gifts. It means sincere love, being devoted to one another, sharing with people in need, practicing hospitality, loving your enemies and responding to evil with kindness. In Romans 13:9 he says that all of God's commands are summed up in the one command Jesus gave us: "Love your neighbor as yourself." *That* is what it *means* to offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God—not necessarily going to Africa to live among the poor, not setting yourself up to suffer as much as you can for Jesus—but allowing the love of God to transform your actual day-to-day behavior so that the way you relate to believers and unbelievers *shows* people what Jesus' new kingdom is like.

Ephesians 5:1-2 puts this same truth in another way: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Let us love the way God loved us, as First John says. Imitate God. Christ loved us, and because he loved us he offered his life as a sacrifice. Now it is our turn to offer our lives as sacrifices. And that means living in love.

When Victoria was the queen of the British Empire, she once visited the Punjab in India. A young prince asked to approach her throne. She permitted him to come near, and she saw that he was just a child. He held up to her a small bag and gave it to the queen. Out of the bag fell a brilliant, polished diamond. Everyone gasped at its size. It was known as the Koh-i-noor diamond and was the stuff of legends. The child-prince turned away.

Many years later, the prince made a trip as a grown man to London and went to see the aging Victoria. He asked if the diamond could be brought from the vault to the palace so that he could see it again. When it was brought and placed in his hand, the prince said, “Your Highness, years ago when I was a small child I gave this diamond to you. At that time I had no idea what it was worth. Now I am a man. I know what this diamond is worth. May I give it to you again, with all my heart?”

It may be that you gave your life to Jesus long ago. But you didn’t really know what you were giving him. You didn’t know what it would really cost. But now that you do know, now that you know what your life is worth, not that you know what obeying Jesus means, will you give it to him again?