

Ephesians 5:1-2

Thankfulness Leads to Sacrifice, which Leads to Thankfulness

Main idea: Christ's sacrifice for us invites us to sacrifice for Him and one another.

I read a real-life pay-it-forward story the other day on the Huffington Post, and wanted to share it with you this morning.¹ It was written by Mark Redmond, who runs a homeless ministry in Burlington, Vermont. One day, Mark took a much needed day off, but he still wanted to stop by his office in order to pick up his mail. He went in the back door, just wanting to slip in and slip out after checking his mail. And his plan went flawlessly until, as he walked towards the mailroom, he glanced toward the front desk, where the office receptionist was usually seated. Among her other duties, the receptionist greets homeless teenagers and young adults as they arrive to see their counselors. But this time, for some reason, she was not present, and Mark made eye contact with a young man and woman standing at the desk waiting. The man's facial expression clearly signaled, "Can you help me?" At first, Mark did not stop, instead proceeding into the mailroom, thinking, "This is my day off. I hardly ever take a day off. I don't want to get pulled into this situation, whatever it may be."

But then he reasoned to himself, "They're probably just here to see their counselors. I'll just ask them who they're here to see, and it will only take two seconds."

So he did, asking them how he could help, and the man surprised him by lifting up a shopping bag full of clothes. "We're just here to donate these," he said. "That's so nice," Mark replied. "Thank you very much!" And the young man said, "You know, I used to come here for help." "Really?" Mark replied. "Yes, to your Drop-In Center around the corner. I'd go there to get meals and clothing. And I lived there too, upstairs." "In our shelter?" Mark asked. "Yes," he replied. "I was homeless then, and you took me in." Mark responded, "I'm glad to hear that. Did you have a good experience with us?" The young man laughed and said, "I sure did." And he pointed at the woman next to him and said, "That's how I met my wife!"

Mark just stood there, kind of just in shock from their story and said, "You're telling me you were each homeless, got help from us, and now you are coming back to help the kids who are here now?" They nodded in agreement and said, "Yeah, we're just so thankful for all the help we got that we're happy to help others in the same way." So Mark shook their hands, thanked them profusely, and they left.

I tell that story this morning to introduce the principle that thankfulness leads to sacrifice, which leads to thankfulness. And this is even more true when it comes to living out our faith. God doesn't want us just to be saved so that we would sit in pews. He calls us to serve and sacrifice.² But He calls us not to do these things not reluctantly, but with thankfulness to God.

You see, Christ's sacrifice for us invites us to sacrifice for Him and one another, with joy.

Ephesians 5:1-2

Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

Father, help us to follow Your example not only in love, but in sacrifice. In Jesus's name, Amen.

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/this-pay-it-forward-story-will-warm-your-heart_b_7477278

² Psalm 100:1-2

In general, it's important not only to know rules, but the reasons why those rules are important. The why often helps us to more faithfully obey the what.

So I looked up a few strange laws in the state of Illinois, places many of you have been, so that you know how to avoid breaking the law the next time we pass through. In Normal, Illinois, it's illegal to make faces at dogs. In Chicago, it's illegal to go fishing in pajamas. And in Joliet, it's illegal to pronounce the name of the city "Jolly-ette."

I wonder if any of us would be in jail if we lived in these cities. And I really wonder how any of these things became laws, because not only do they seem harmless, but it would be difficult for anyone to justify why any of these things should be against the law.

Well, our passage this morning gives us certain commands, and also gives us the reasons why it gives us those commands. So not only do the commands themselves make reasonable sense, but knowing the why for the commands give us even more reason to obey the what. So let's look first at the reasons why, and then we'll look at the commands themselves.

Paul begins verse 1 with the word "therefore," which often allows us to easily find the reason for the command. Because whenever we see the word "therefore" in the Bible, we should ask what the "therefore" is there for. To do that, you usually just need to read the previous verse.

So, Ephesians 4:32 says:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ. (Ephesians 4:32)

So, the reason for us to be kind and compassionate to one another, the reason that we're to forgive one another, and the reason we're to be imitators of God is because God forgave us in Christ. God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us on the cross,³ sacrificing His life for ours. And we're to demonstrate our love for Him through sacrifice.

Now, I think many cultures throughout history were confused about what kind of sacrifice God requires. We've probably all heard about the practices of the Mayan and Aztec civilizations, who each routinely practiced human sacrifices because they thought that their gods demanded these sacrifices from them in order to be blessed.

And before the law was given, even Abraham thought that God was truly calling him to sacrifice his son Isaac, because God sure made it seem that way.⁴ But, through the course of the story, it was revealed that it was only a test of faith, because God doesn't delight in that kind of sacrifice.⁵

In fact, God doesn't even delight in the sacrifice of animals, even though it was commanded in the Old Testament. In Psalm 51:16-17, David prayed to God:

You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God. (Psalm 51:16-17)

³ Romans 5:8

⁴ Genesis 22:1-2

⁵ Genesis 22:10-12

So all the sacrifices in the Old Testament weren't about killing animals for the sake of killing animals. It was about the hearts of those making the sacrifices. God wanted them to trust Him.⁶

Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 at least twice during His ministry, which says:

For I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)

So, yes, the Jews under the Old Covenant were commanded to sacrifice animals for their sins, which points to the sacrifice that Jesus would make for us, but these sacrifices were also an opportunity for the Jews to practice faithfully obeying God, which is what God really wanted.

We find that same theme earlier in the book of Ephesians. Ephesians 2:8-9.

For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift - not from works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

So we're to be thankful for God's forgiveness through faith in Christ, and that's immediately followed by verse 10.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

So we see that Jesus was the sacrifice for our sins, and He calls us to follow Him in sacrifice.

That's the idea that we find in our passage today as well. Verse 2.

Walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. (Ephesians 5:2)

Now, there are spiritual realities going on here. We were dead in our sins, but God made us alive.⁷ We were spiritual orphans, but God adopted us as His own dearly loved children.⁸ But practically, I just want to point out the obvious that when we receive God's forgiveness for what He did for us, that ought to cause us to be thankful.

And for believers, thankfulness leads to sacrifice, which leads to thankfulness.

Be thankful for what Jesus has done for you.⁹ And don't just be thankful in passing, or when you come to church, but as a way of life.¹⁰ People who are thankful, seeing everything as a blessing, are happier, healthier, and more productive in their daily lives.¹¹ And that's even more true when it comes to our faith. When you're truly thankful for what Jesus has done for you, sacrificing His life for you, you begin to joyfully sacrifice for Him.¹²

⁶ Proverbs 3:5-6

⁷ Ephesians 2:1-5

⁸ Galatians 4:5-7, Ephesians 2:5

⁹ 2 Corinthians 9:15, Colossians 2:6-7

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:20

¹¹ <https://www.prialto.com/blog/how-practicing-gratitude-makes-you-more-productive>

¹² Hebrews 13:15

So we've looked at the reasons why we're given certain commands in our passage this morning. Now let's look at the commands themselves.

Verse 1 begins by saying:

Therefore, be imitators of God. (Ephesians 5:1a)

Of course, that's an impossible command for us to obey perfectly. God is perfect in every way.¹³ He's all-powerful,¹⁴ all-wise,¹⁵ and all-loving,¹⁶ and we're not all of any of these things. But when Paul commands us to be imitators of God in this verse, it's in a very specific way. We're to imitate God in His sacrificial love toward us. We see that in verse 2. Verse 2 begins:

And walk in love. (Ephesians 5:2a)

So, be imitators of God, and walk in love. Those are our commands from Scripture this morning. And it's also a good summary of the commands of the Bible. Someone asked Jesus in Matthew 22, starting in verse 36:

"Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?" [And Jesus] said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands." (Matthew 22:36-40)

But why? Yes, all of the laws of the Old Testament can be summed up in the command to love, but why? Why is love so important? 1 John 4:7-8.

Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

So, God is love, and we're commanded to imitate God, so we're commanded to walk in love.

John 15:13 says:

No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)

That's what Jesus did for us, and that's what God calls us to do for one another. He calls us to love Him, and love one another to the point of sacrificing our time, energy, money, and dreams out of love.

Sometimes when we think about making these kinds of sacrifices, we think about how much of a burden it would be. We think about how we'll have to give these things up and maybe never get them back, and how we're just not sure that we want to give them up. It's a burden.

I talked a little last week about Elizabeth Elliot, who lost her first husband to a tribe in Ecuador, and her second husband to cancer. On the same CD I mentioned last week, titled "Suffering is Not for Nothing," Elizabeth said this:

¹³ Matthew 5:48

¹⁴ Psalm 147:5

¹⁵ Psalm 104:24, Isaiah 40:28

¹⁶ 1 John 4:16

To my amazement and delight, I discovered that the word burden in the Hebrew is the same word as the word for gift. This is a transforming truth to me. If I thank God for this very thing which is killing me, I can begin dimly and faintly to see it as a gift. I can realize that it is through that very thing which is so far from being the thing I would have chosen, that God wants to teach me His way of salvation. -

Elizabeth Elliot

Maybe God doesn't want to take away your time, but to bless you through your giving of time. Maybe God doesn't want you to give up on your dreams, but to truly find that all your hopes and dreams are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So when we "give up" some of these things as a sacrifice to God, it's not so much that we're sacrificing them in the sense that we often think of sacrifice, but simply that we're exchanging them for an even greater blessing from God.

God calls us to walk in love. Love means sacrifice, but it also means love. Love means enjoying the One you sacrifice for.

On August 10, 2002, around 4:30 pm, I said, "I do." I told Abby I would take her as my wife, to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, as a reluctant sacrifice for as long as we both shall live. Right?

No! And if I had said that, I probably wouldn't have her as my wife today.

No, I told Abby I would take her as my wife, to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish for as long as we both shall live.

Because loving and cherishing her isn't a reluctant sacrifice, but a joy.

Elizabeth Elliot also said this:

Among the greatest gifts of my life are my husband, my daughter, and my grandchildren-and there are times when I can be very selfish about those gifts. And yet I have to recognize that they're not just for me. But these, also, that I think of as my own, but be held with an open hand and offered back to God along with my body and all that I am. - Elizabeth Elliot

I think what she's saying is that thankfulness leads to sacrifice, which leads to thankfulness. If you're thankful for the gift of your family, don't hoard the gift of your family, but learn to offer your family back to God. If you're thankful for the gift of your job, don't treat your job as the ultimate goal in life, but seek to glorify God through your job. And if you're thankful for the gift of your life, don't seek to save your life, hoarding it for yourself, but rather deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus. For those who seek to save their lives will lose them, Jesus says, "but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."¹⁷

Christ's sacrifice for us invites us to sacrifice for Him and one another. It was for the joy set before Him that Jesus endured the cross,¹⁸ and in the same way, God calls us to also sacrifice with thankfulness.

¹⁷ Compare Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, and Luke 17:33

¹⁸ Hebrews 12:2