

OFFERING YOUR BODY

Scriptures: Romans 12:1-13, 14-21

A few years ago I read a story in the *Spokesman-Review* by Michael Guilfoil about a marathon runner named Carol Dellinger. He writes,

Most people observe their religion while sitting quietly in a church or temple. Carol Dellinger celebrates hers outdoors, panting, sweating and grinding away shoe soles on pavement. ... On Saturday, the 39 year-old dental hygienist ran the Nashville Country Music Marathon, her 149th 26.2-miler. She also has logged several 50-mile “ultraruns” and roughly 25,000 training miles since trading her baseball cleats for running shoes back in 1985. “I’m a baptized Lutheran, and went to church every Sunday until my 18th birthday,” says the Deer Park native. “Now, running is my religion. I feel like I see more of God three hours into a marathon than I would ever see sitting in a church listening to a sermon” (*Spokesman-Review*, April 28, 2002).

If I were three hours into a marathon, I would also feel closer to meeting my Maker. But I don’t think that is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he told us “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Carol has one thing right. We do not worship God only in church. We worship God by what we do with our bodies. I am not sure that marathon running is what Paul meant, but he certainly meant more than sitting in church. He meant that all of bodily life is an arena for serving God.

One place to do this, of course, is in the church. In Romans 12, verses 4-5, Paul says, “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” When Paul talks about one body in Christ, he is talking about the church. We offer our bodies to be part of a bigger body—the body of Christ.

Beginning in verse 6, Paul talks about different ways to do this: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” He then lists some examples. If you noticed, the list of gifts of the Holy Spirit that we read today is different than the lists we read over the last two weeks. None of these lists represents all the gifts of the Holy Spirit; they are only samples. The point is that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including gifts like encouraging people, showing compassion to people, and offering hospitality, are meant to be used to show God’s love in human bodily life.

This is true not only inside the church but outside the church. Notice verse 13. Paul says, “Contribute to the needs of the saints.” In Paul’s terminology, the saints mean you folks. He is talking about helping each other in the church. But then notice the rest of the verse: “Extend hospitality to strangers.” Part of this means showing hospitality to people inside the church, like going over to meet someone you don’t know in the coffee hour or helping with a reception after a memorial service for people you don’t know. But it also means showing

hospitality to strangers outside the church, like when we put together sack lunches for Cup of Cool Water or House of Charity, or when we provide food for the food bank or baby items mothers at the Mission Community Outreach Center. We are extending hospitality to strangers.

But there is more. In verses 14-18 Paul says,

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

All of these statements affect how you live when you are away from the church, when you are out in the world Monday through Saturday. The next chapter, Romans 13, even talks about how we relate to the government. It even mentions paying taxes, though I guess I am a little late for a sermon about that. The point is that offering your body as a living sacrifice means using your bodily life including your mind (Paul talks about being transformed by the renewing of your mind) to serve God in the bodily life of the world. Chris Beker, one of my teachers at Princeton Seminary put it this way. He said that Christian life is “life in the body for other bodies with the body of Christ” (*Paul the Apostle*, p. 314). Christian life is life in the body for other bodies as part of the body of Christ.

Let me share two stories. Until recently I did not know that Ben Franklin was a Presbyterian; at least he attended a Presbyterian church in Philadelphia for several years. I learned this from Walter Isaacson’s biography called *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. Franklin attended a Presbyterian church to hear the preaching of a Presbyterian minister from Ireland named Samuel Hemphill. Hemphill gave lively and powerful sermons that stressed serving Jesus in every day life, and Ben Franklin, who was nothing if not practical, appreciated this emphasis. Unfortunately, Pastor Hemphill was fired when it was found that he plagiarized his sermons. Ben Franklin made an interesting comment about this. He said, “I rather approved of his giving us good sermons composed by others, than bad ones of his own manufacture, though the latter was the practice of our common teachers” (p. 109).

I would hardly call Ben Franklin an orthodox Presbyterian, and he left the Presbyterian Church after Pastor Hemphill was fired. But Ben Franklin picked up one key truth of Presbyterian theology: God is worshiped and served in all of bodily life. At the conclusion of his biography, Isaacson writes,

Franklin’s belief that he could best serve God by serving his fellow man may strike some as mundane, but it was in truth a worthy creed that he deeply believed and faithfully followed. He was remarkably versatile in this service. He devised legislatures and lightning rods, lotteries and lending libraries. He sought practical ways to make stoves less smoky and commonwealths less corrupt. He organized neighborhood constabularies and international alliances. He combined two types of lenses to create bifocals and two types of representation to foster the nation’s federal compromise. As his friend the

French statesman Turgot said ... he snatched lightning from the sky and the scepter from tyrants (p. 492).

Ben Franklin would have like Romans 12: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Christian life is life in the body for other bodies as part of the body of Christ.

One last story. A few years ago I heard Tony Campolo, a Christian sociologist, speak at First Presbyterian Church here in Spokane. He told of meeting a bum on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia. The bum was walking crookedly toward him on the sidewalk covered with grime. The worst part, Campolo said, was that he had a waist long gray beard full of snarls and bits of food that appeared to have been rotting there for some time. The man approached him drinking a cup of coffee, and as he got close he held out the cup and said to Campolo, "Here, would you like a little drink of coffee." Campolo said he wanted to run away, but he could not get out of his mind the Bible verse where Jesus says, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." He did not want to insult Jesus, so he took the cup and took a quick little drink. Then he said to the man, "Why are you sharing your coffee with me?" The man replied, "The coffee today was especially good, and when you get something good from God, you ought to share it." Campolo looked at him and said, "You're setting me up, aren't you. You want me to share something with you, now." The man set down his coffee and said, "All I want is a hug." Campolo said he would rather have given him money, but it was too late. Campolo put his arms around the man, and the man gave him a great big bear hug, squeezing him against his food-encrusted beard. Then the man picked up his coffee and went on down the sidewalk smiling.

That, more than marathon running, is what Paul means when he says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." The Christian life is life in the body for other bodies as part of the body of Christ. What you do with your body during the week is the best offering to God you can give, because it isn't your money that God wants most; it's you.

- Ken Onstot
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