

SACRIFICE
John 15:13, Isaiah 1:13
By Raymond White

We certainly like our relationship with God as long as he gives us goodies. But at what point do we give something back to him?

All relationships are based on reciprocation, if not right away, then eventually. A demand for quid-pro-quo might seem callous and makes giving feel insincere, to have strings attached. But the fact is that unrequited love and unrequited giving get old fast. When we give we generally expect something back, at least a thank you or some minimum show of appreciation. Not always but usually. If expecting something back makes giving seem insincere, then giving nothing back makes receiving seem *really* insincere. The issues are appreciation, gratitude, respect, and most importantly, love. If you love someone enough to give generously to that person, you generally have some expectation that that person will reciprocate that love and show it in some way.

God feels the same way. He loves us and he wants us to love him back. He's not insincere, he just wants an eternal love relationship with us and that means reciprocation. Parents love their children. And it goes without saying that they expect their children to love them back. If that never happens, then parents are, at the very least, hurt. God has the same hope for us as do our parents.

1 John 4:19 We love him, because he first loved us.

And that brings us to this question: How does God know that you love him? For that matter, how do *you* know that you love him? That we thank him in prayer? Well certainly that, minimally. But talk is cheap. Anything else? That you accept his goodies? Well, that too. Just accepting a gift in good faith is itself a show of love, but surely there must be something else, some real reciprocation.

Here's what I'm getting at. At some point, to demonstrate real love, you must actually give up something. Why? Because love demands a decision. Love is qualitative, and quantitative. If I claim to love someone, how much is a fair question. How do you measure love? "I love you more than ... more than ..." Yes? More than what? More than your car? All married people claim to love their spouse, but half of them not even enough to be faithful, so love clearly has its limits.

Somewhere along the line you have to give up something that you love dearly because you love God more. That's the test, the moment of truth. Until that moment of actual choice cemented by an actual sacrifice, you don't really know.

Jesus said it so simply.

John 15:13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

Then he walked to his cross and did just that: he laid down his life for his friends. So when you say, "I love you," to your spouse, to your children, to your God, think about what you are saying and ask yourself what does that mean anyway?

To help us understand exactly what we mean by “I love you,” God has given us a simple principle: sacrifice. This is where the rubber meets the road. If you are really love God, as you say you do, what will you give up for him? You love him more than . . . than what exactly?

“But that’s no fair,” you complain. “That’s strings attached. I thought his love was unconditional.” Yeah, well, even God’s love wears thin when there’s no reciprocation. Deal with it. You have decisions to make. Make them.

[1] ANIMAL SACRIFICE

Ancient Israel sacrificed lots of animals. The book of Leviticus is all about that. There’s sin offering, and burnt offering, and this offering, and that offering — read it sometime, it’ll make your eyes glaze over. One thing all those offerings have in common is that they are all performed on altars.

Today we use altars today for religious ceremonies: for sacrament or communion, for weddings, and for a few other things. When we make a covenant with God, and we want to show God that we really mean it, we bring that covenant to an altar. Why?

Well, here’s the question: What exactly is an altar? And here’s the answer (you might not like it): An altar is a butcher’s table. Oh, yuck! That’s an awful thought, isn’t it? No. It’s not an awful thought, and that’s exactly what it is — the place where a priest laid his animal victim and slit its throat. And it’s a proper symbol for what’s really happening — a life in exchange for sin.

We kill animals today. Of course we do. I love prime rib. I’m not a vegetarian. I didn’t fight my way to the top of the food chain to be a vegetarian. But those priests of ancient Israel had respect for the animals they we’re slaughtering which is more than we can say for ourselves. They, at least, were offering them to God. And every time they slit an animal’s throat, they reviewed again, sensed again, the high cost of sin, a sense that we have almost completely lost.

The next time to take the sacrament, consider that table, that altar, and the priests behind it pulling apart flesh and draining off the blood. Then count the cost of your sins.

1 Corinthians 6:20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit which are God’s.

That was those ancient priests did. But it’s also what our priests do today. So when you bring an offering to God and lay it on an altar — maybe you kneel at an altar and say “I do” as you get married — what are you saying, really? Well, look at the altar, a butcher’s table and understand that you are promising to give your life to that person.

[2] SINCERITY

There was an occasion when David had a need to make an offering to God. It’s a long story and you can read it later. David came to a priest and said I want to buy a lamb from you to make an offering. The priest, being a generous man and David’s friend said, you don’t have to pay me, here’s a lamb, my gift to you, make your offering.

How David replied to that gracious offer is insightful, and a lesson to us that we should take to heart.

2 Samuel 24:24 Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing.

It's not a sacrifice if someone gives it to you. Your sacrifice must be *your* sacrifice; if, that is, you want it to be sincere. Otherwise, it doesn't mean much.

What does it cost you, this sacrifice you're about to make? — or this act of charity, or this act of honesty? The more it costs you the more it means.

[3] SACRIFICE IS MAKING A CHOICE THAT YOU CAN'T AVOID

Jesus said hate your family. It's impossible that he meant that with today's meaning of the word. The 4th commandment is to honor your father and mother, and Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees for doing a bad job of that.

Further, Paul said, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church."

Further, Genesis says that Jacob "Loved Rachael and hated Leah." Well, if he hated Leah so much, then why did he give her six children? Half of his twelve sons were Leah's. That doesn't sound like hate to me. Further, God said, "Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated." Really? Then why did he bless Esau with so much?

Here's point: Jacob didn't hate Leah, not in the modern sense of the word, but Jacob preferred Rachael more. And God didn't hate Esau, he just loved Jacob more.

And when our King James Bible puts the word "hate" into Jesus' mouth, understand that Jesus said no such thing. What he said was, love me more than all the other things you love. Not hate your parents, but love me more than even your parents.

Okay. So now, how do you know that you do that, that you love God and Jesus above all else? The only way to know for sure is at the moment of decision, when you must choose. Do you want chocolate or vanilla? For me, I prefer pistachio, and it troubles me in the ice cream store that I cannot also have black cherry. I could have both if I were willing to have two scoops, but two scoops makes me sick, so I stick with pistachio and pass on the black cherry, and grumble about not also having black cherry. But at no time do I blame my deprivation on someone else. It is, after all, my choice.

Do you want God, or do you want something else? Choose. But when you've chosen, don't blame God that you didn't get everything you wanted. You can have anything you want, but you can't have everything you want. That's the devil of it.

[4] GREAT FAILURES

Here are a few of the bible's great failures, people who faced great decisions that required a great sacrifice, and made exactly the wrong choice.

Cain (Genesis 4:3-5): He made a sacrifice, but it was the wrong sacrifice and just self serving. **Proverbs 15:8** *The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD ...* God rejects some sacrifices, those that he does not want it and does not ask for. The irony of Cain's sacrifice is that he was a sinner showing off how good he, while Abel was a righteous man confessing how sinful he was.

The Rich Young Ruler (Luke 18:18-23): I believe that Jesus was calling this young man to join his inner circle. Had he accepted the Lord's invitation, he might have been one of the apostles. But he decided that the sacrifice was too much. And we might be inclined to agree — no one should have to sacrifice *everything* — except that some *did* sacrifice everything: **Matthew 19:27** *Then answered Peter and said unto him [Jesus], Behold, we have forsaken all ...*

The 5000 (John 5): Last night, Jesus fed 5000. This morning they were back for breakfast, and of course they wanted to make him king. Why not? Free food. Free health care, what a great king Jesus would make. But Jesus declined. And instead, demanded something from them. What did he demand? Everything. Total commitment. "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." Well, everything was too big a sacrifice and so they walked away.

Judas (John 12:5, Matthew 26:15): There are only two conversation in the Bible that involved Judas, and both were about money. His heart was set on money, and when it became clear that Jesus would die and that Judas had wasted three years of his life for a failed kingdom, he decided to grab what he could and get out. The sacrifice he had already made was too much, he would sacrifice nothing further.

Pontius Pilate (John 19:6): Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent and he said so. Further, he felt genuine guilt, enough to wash his hands of the mess, or tried to. But in spite of his knowledge and his guilt, he still ordered Jesus to be crucified. He could have freed Jesus, but he was afraid of complaints reaching the ears of the Emperor. What would have been the consequence of that? We don't know. But it was a sacrifice he was unwilling to make, and so he choose instead to let an innocent man die on a cross.

[5] GREAT SUCCESSES

The bible is so full of people who rose to greatness by making great sacrifices that to list them and tell their stories would require a great book, which would be a waste of time because there is already such a great book: the bible.

A young Catholic woman once said to me that she wanted to strengthen her faith and asked me what she might do. I said that she should read the entire bible straight through from Genesis to Revelation. An older Catholic woman sitting next to her disagreed with me and said no, she should only read the New Testament and start with Matthew. I disagreed back, and said that if the younger woman was a non-believer looking for conversion, yes, start at Matthew and read the New Testament. But in this case, the younger woman is already a believer, a practicing Catholic, and what her soul could use right now is the once-in-a-lifetime experience of reading the entire bible straight through from cover to cover. The older woman finally agreed with me.

You should consider doing that too. It will create a panorama of everything, and one of the things you will discover (which you already know) is that greatness requires sacrifice.

If you don't want to take on the entire bible right now (but do it sometime), then yes, read the New Testament. If you don't want to take on the New Testament right now, then for a short list of bible heroes who sacrificed much, read **Hebrew 11**. The subject is faith. But I see in it that the subject is really sacrifice, faith is what brings on the courage and determination that causes a person to make the sacrifice that results in greatness.

Then you can make your own list of sacrificing heroes and hopefully model your life after them.

[6] HEROISM

There are all kinds of sacrifices, all kinds of heroism. Some sacrifices are lifelong like supporting an invalid child. Some sacrifices are made at a single moment like rushing into a burning building to save a child and dying for the effort.

I imagine that all Christians imagine themselves to be heroes, that he or she would do the brave thing for a great good when fate calls. I hope that's true. But the truth is that none of us really know how we will react when that great good demands that we place ourselves in harm's way.

To help you out here, I want to give you some heroism training and cause you to assess your own level of willingness to be inconvenienced to help others. In other words, just what is your sacrifice tolerance?

In 1973, a "Good Samaritan" study was done by J.M. Darley and C.D. Batson. Their goal was to determine, if possible, what influences might cause a person to stop or not stop to render assistance to a person in need. So they set up an experiment to answer these three questions:

1. Does religious persuasion determine if a person is more likely to act as a Good Samaritan?
2. If a person is thinking Good Samaritan thoughts, does that make the person more likely to act as a Good Samaritan?
3. If a person is in a hurry, does that make the person more likely to act as a Good Samaritan?

Here's how the study was conducted. The subjects were all seminary students. They were filling out religious questionnaires and doing procedures in one building then told to go to another building to continue. On the way, they encountered a man in an alleyway who appeared to be ill, slumped and coughing. The experiment was to determine how many of the students would stop and render assistance or at least enquire if the man needed help.

To determine if thinking about the Good Samaritan altered behavior, some students were asked to give talks about the parable and others were not. To determine if religious persuasion was a factor, the students filled out questionnaires about their religious persuasion. And finally, to assess the effect of urgency, some students were told to get to the other building quickly and others not so quickly.

It is no surprise that the greater the urgency, the fewer the students who stopped to help or inquire. What is a surprise is that students whose minds were on the Good Samaritan behaved no differently than other students. And more surprisingly, religious persuasion had no effect on behavior. Only the level of urgency affected behavior.

Well, Jesus told us that 2000 years ago, didn't he? The point of his Good Samaritan parable was not that Samaritans were better people than priests or Levites, but that there is no correlation, that anyone, regardless of religious bent, is as likely or

unlikely to behave heroically as anyone else. In Jesus' story, it was a Samaritan that rose to the need and became a hero. But anyone might, or might not.

Where does that leave you? It means that if you intend to behave like a hero when the moment comes, you might at least be thinking about it. Otherwise, who knows what you'll do.

Urgency is not the only thing that might cause us to fail to behave heroically. I once read about a woman who was beaten and murdered in an alleyway as fifty witnesses watched from their apartment windows. When the police asked them why none of them called for help they each said that with so many witnesses surely someone else had already called. In other words, the woman died *because* there were fifty witnesses.

The point of that story is that heroes don't assume that someone else is doing the heroic thing. If it's going to get done, you must do it yourself.

And now a story of my own. Earlier this year (2012) my wife and I were at a restaurant. By chance we sat next to a couple we knew from church and were enjoying a conversation with them. But about four feet in front of me was a tall table with tall chairs with a mother and a three year old daughter. And I remember saying to myself, "By golly, that little girl is going to roll back and tumble to the floor." So I kept an eye on her as I tried to listen to my church friend.

Then he said something that caused me to turn and face him, and at that exact moment, that little girl did indeed roll back and tumbled three feet to the floor. She was crying as mommy came rushing around to gather her up. And she was uninjured, saved most likely by the large bun of hair that mommy had tied up behind her head which cushioned her impact. She was okay, and thank God for that.

But she might not have been okay. She might have been seriously injured and it would have been my fault because I saw what was about to happen, prepared myself to lunge forward and catch her before impact, but then at the critical moment allowed myself to get distracted and became useless thus risking a little girl's life. Had she been injured, I would never have forgiven myself. I don't forgive myself anyway and have vowed never again to allow distraction to keep me from doing the necessary thing.

[7] DO WE NEED TO LOOK FOR SOMEWAY TO SACRIFICE OURSELVES?

If sacrifice is the only way to show true love, then should we seek for ways to sacrifice ourselves?

Well, no, of course not. Certainly we need to be attentive, to try to see the needs of others. But to look for a lion to throw ourselves to, that's not what Jesus is asking us to do. If that were the case, then he would not have said in the garden, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass." He was not a masochist looking for pain or death. If he were, then it would not have been a sacrifice. But he was trying to avoid death, and only when he could not escape it without sacrificing us did he surrender to it and sacrificed himself.

It's the "if you are called to it" that matters. That may be God's choice for us, if it is, but it is never our choice for ourselves. We are not God.

In the play "Man For All Seasons" by Richard Bolt, Sir Thomas Moore is required by Parliament to agree to the king's divorce and remarriage. But Thomas cannot do that even if he must sacrifice his own life.

To corner Thomas, Parliament has just sealed their requirement with a new act demanding an oath. Thomas's son-in-law insists that they cannot take the oath. But Thomas, not so eager to die, says let's read it, maybe we can take it.

"Now listen, Will, And, Meg, you listen, too, you know I know you well. God made the angels to show him splendor — as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind! If he suffers us to fall to such a case that there is no escaping, then we may stand to our tackle as best we can, and yes, Will, then we may clamor like champions ... if we have the spittle for it. And no doubt it delights God to see splendor where He only looked for complexity. But it's God's part, not our own, to bring ourselves to that extremity! Our natural business lies in escaping — so let's get home and study this Bill."

So they went home, studied the bill, and Thomas knew he could not take the oath. So he went to prison, and was eventually beheaded.

He died, because he chose to die rather than violate his conscience. But his first thought was escape. And so was Jesus', and so should ours. Then, if we cannot escape, then die gallantly. But it is not our duty to make ourselves martyrs.

[8] LIMITS OF SACRIFICE

The problem with sacrifice is that we can begin to think that it's the *sacrifice* that pleases God. It is not. Sacrifice is only the evidence of something else, something greater. We need to understand that sacrifice not all that God wants from us. If sacrifice is all we have to offer to God, we've fallen woefully short. Sacrifices can be offered just for approval but without any love. When that happens, then what's the point of the sacrifice? By itself, sacrifice means nothing.

Psalms 40:6 Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required.

Proverbs 21:3 To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.

Isaiah 1:11 To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? Saith the Lord: I am full 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. :13 Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination to me; the new moons and Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.

Sacrifice (or baptism or any other religious ritual) does not complete what God wants from us. There's more, much more, to the believing life than that.

[9] CAN ONLY PRIESTS OFFER SACRIFICES?

This is a far question since one non-priest died when he touched the ark of the covenant (2 *Samuel 6:6-7*), and another non-priest (a king) was stricken with leprosy

when he tried to usurp the priestly role (**2 Chronicles 26:19**). But if we are to understand that under no circumstance can anyone who is not a priest perform a sacrifice, then what are we to make of these verses?

Judges 6:25 *The LORD said unto him [Gideon] :26 offer a burnt sacrifice.*

Gideon is from the tribe of Manassah and he was no priest. But God ordered him to make a burnt offering, and he did.

Judges 13:19 *So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it.*

Manoah was from the tribe of Dan and again, he was no priest. But God accepted his offering anyway (**13:23**).

And finally,

2 Samuel 24:25 *And David built there an altar unto the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the Lord was intreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel.*

Now wait a minute. These verses seems to fly in the face of everything we've so far read about priests and sacrifices and such. *Gideon and Manoah and David were not priests!* They weren't even Levites. Gideon was from the tribe of Manassah, and Manoah from the tribe of Dan, and David was from the tribe of Judah. Who said Gideon could offer a sacrifice? God did. And Manoah's offering was accepted and so was David's.

So we really need to cast a suspicious eye on anyone, any prophet, who insists, "God said I can do this, therefore you can't." Maybe that's true, or maybe it's not.

Maybe we should conclude this: Being a priest is not a requirement to making an offering to God *for oneself*. Maybe being a priest is to be an agent; that is, to act for someone else. If that is the case, then that, anyway, is consistent with all the verses on the subject.