

Gracious Sacrifice

Menno Mennonite Church

August 23, 2026

Purpose: To connect the presence of God's work to our response as a body.

Message: The invitation into the culture of the kingdom is a response to God's grace, something that we are well reminded of time and again/

Scripture: Romans 11:33- 12:8 (I will read); Isaiah 51:1-6 (Please read)

Synopsis: Sacrifice has been with us as long as the concept of sin has been. It is part of the system relied upon to make things right between what they were meant to be and how they are. Yet Paul's language here invites us into a new sense of the word and the work of sacrifice, not to earn grace but to respond to it as the logical out growth of what God has already done. This famous text comes as a culmination of a long recitation of God's work to shape the body in the ways that God wills. The responses from there are commended to God's people as the natural gifting resulting from grace. Accordingly the gifts that we use and build upon are importantly understood as a working of God's good grace and the world that the kingdom brings about by that grace.

³³ God's riches, wisdom, and knowledge are so deep!
They are as mysterious as his judgments,
and they are as hard to track as his paths!

³⁴ *Who has known the Lord's mind?
Or who has been his mentor?*

³⁵ *Or who has given him a gift
and has been paid back by him?*

³⁶ All things are from him and through him and for him.
May the glory be to him forever. Amen.

12 So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies,
I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice
that is holy and pleasing to God.
This is your appropriate priestly service.

² Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds
so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

³ Because of the grace that God gave me,
I can say to each one of you:

don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.

Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you.

⁴ We have many parts in one body,
but the parts don't all have the same function.

⁵ In the same way, though there are many of us,
we are one body in Christ,
and individually we belong to each other.

⁶ We have different gifts that are consistent with God's grace that has been given to us.

If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith.

⁷ If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving.

If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching.

⁸ If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging.

The one giving should do it with no strings attached.

The leader should lead with passion.

The one showing mercy should be cheerful.

As the saying goes, there really is nothing new under the sun. The problems that we have in our day, tangled and complicated though they be in the ways of our present world, resonate with the problems the world has had all along. Even if they are not precisely the same, they themes do rhyme. The complexities of how we use the social media tools we have at our disposal connect into the complex balance of community standards and individuality that always have needed to be negotiated. There has always been the things that we have to negotiate, behaviors that have needed to be addressed, rules to be made and enforced, consequences that needed to be addressed all the along.

It really should come as no surprise that sacrifice has been connected to the question of faith almost as long as there has been sin. Genesis chapter 4, while the world is still young, describes the sacrifices made by Cain and Abel as an honoring of God as well a point of contention. Through the story of God and people, sacrifice is brought to the table. Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob offered sacrifices to solidify the relationships and remember the acts of God as they walked with their parts of the story. Sacrifice spoke to the things that had happened and signified the commitments that were made. Exodus and Leviticus describes the needed processes to maintain the communities relationship with the God of covenant as a matter of worship and connection. Sacrifice is what is demanded by the gods in scenario to keep the world turning right and to manage the challenges of the world as it is known. When you want to say that you are sorry, or desire something to be done, sacrifice is where humanity turns to get the message across.

Which is why when Paul starts speaking of living sacrifice here it can put us a bit off guard. This was, we say, what Jesus came to dismantle and let us know it was no longer needed between us and God. Yet there is no escaping: “I urge you therefore in view of God’s mercy to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God.” It is the type of sentence that almost requires a visible foot note be flashed on the screen to let people who happen to walk in on the conversation and not know what we are talking about that there is a lot more to be said than just that. Speaking as someone who growing up was given to hearing a bit too literally the readings we received from the ocean and was given to pondering the plucking out of eyes to avoid sin, for example, it is something that needs to be considered. That is not what he is saying, but Paul is calling for sacrifice all the same. This is not a time where we can take a look at the Greek and say “well, it

isn't there." It is. Right word. Right imperative. It is there. But what does it mean and what do we do about it. What, really, does he mean by all of that.

None of this would strike the ancient air half as strangely as it does ours. Both Israel and Rome's religious rites functioned with sacrifice as a primary part of the world in which they live. The Old Testament precedent for sacrifice provides connection to what Paul is calling for here. Sacrifice was a recognition that the constant of God's mercy was what is in control. Sacrifice was ritual and responsibility, sure, but always with the trusting expectation of God's gracious reception. It can not be any more clear: our God has met all of God's children with grace, and has addressed the sinful nature with the gift of God's only natural son. Jesus died and was risen from the grave that we might have life. This is the only necessary sacrifice. This is what Paul is fully talking about in the hymn that we opened the reading with. He has spent much of his encouragement to the Romans laying out the reconciliation of God and people and has concluded that in light of this mercy all that there is even left to do is offer praise.

So when we turn the page to chapter 12 we must have chapter 11, really everything that has come before that, ringing in our ears. The question that is left to ponder here is not about how we are to live, what we are to do in order to lead proper lives, or how we ought to conduct ourselves faithfully in the name of Christ. The only thing that we have to do is to offer all of ourselves, all of our intention, best wishes, best hopes and highest aspirations to God because God has completed the work that we could not. The sacrifice that we have is one of attracted amazed and awe-filled response; nothing more. It is the only possible outcome of the knowing the fullness of what there was to be done. Like trying to keep your seat and clapping politely when the home team beats the buzzer is completely and utterly impossible so too is any response to God but full life investment in light of what God has done. Sacrifice is not about achieving what already is; it is about living fully into what already has been accomplished because really we can do nothing else. What's more, the apostle continues, this offering of ourselves is our "true and proper [*logiken* the same root as logically] worship" (1c). God's no longer interested in the sacrifice of animals or produce as part of Jesus' followers' worship of God. God instead longs for God's adopted children's daily worship to include the offering of our whole selves to God. We setup the systems of sacrifice that keep us locked in to pleasing God. God grace liberates us to live into the world as it was meant to be.

The advice that follows spells out, then, what such a liberated life might look like. This is not advice for the sake of “avoid this so as to keep yourself and your act clean” but the natural adaptations to the circumstances of meeting God in God’s world. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world,” Paul encourages his Roman readers in verse 2, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The NRSV translation of *aioni toutou*, what comes out as this world in our reading may more accurately reflect what the apostle is rejecting. It renders it as “this age”, the current state of the world as it is. After all, it’s not so much the world God created and loves as the natural cultural mindset that God calls Jesus’ friends to join God in rejecting. In this grace we are invited into a different way of thinking about the world in which we live and move and adjust ourselves relative to it. Ours is a self-centered culture with little time for what matters beyond what is our personal concern. What is in it for me is the primary motivation. Paul invites the reader to substitute the motivation of the Spirit focusing us on grace and the consequences of grace to give a different. *The Message* paraphrases this admonition as “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking.”

It is out of this reoriented mindset that we are then given a whole new frame with which to consider and respond within the world. When the Spirit transforms that which is self centered in to God Centered we will then not just consider the demands and preferences of the world around us but also consider God’s will and God’s desires as we seek to be about the work of God in the world. The self is changed from the individual standing alone to be judged but now is united by the Spirit and the gifts everyone is given in order to respond to the things of the world. We are given what we need as we need it, something that I will be the first to admit is a difficult thing to learn to trust as a matter of provision. We are used to relying on our own excellence and experience to accomplish that which we can and need to so in the world and often in the body of Christ. The gifts that are given are given to provide what is needed and should be carried with the same gracious reception and open acceptance that maintains a gift as a gift and not a proprietary working of one individual or person, but rather needs to be held with gratitude as yet another function of faith. What seems like just more advice to be good and humble people who are not given to braggadocio is actually a call to continue the work that God started that saves us into a body, a people a reality for the grace that saved us to continue to work.

It is easy to receive all of this as good advice with limited consequence. We have heard Romans 12 and imprecations like it so many times as to be overly familiar with them and the

listing of Gifts and metaphors they contain. But then we remember: the gifts that are named here are not gifts that are particularly human in their nature. Prophecy, speaking truth, God truth, is not something that is organically within the human condition. Serving is about bringing practical help where needed. Teaching involves the slow shaping of the human character from what it is to what it can be. These gifts they reflect the things and the nature of God. They are God things that we are invited to be a part of. This is what God does and what God is about. The gifts that we are to share are just that: gifts from God to bring that of God through the Spirit and out into the world. That is something that cannot be branded, marketed, and held for ransom, but must be shared and must be brought as the grace that it is. It is what we are invited to be a part of while we bring God's good work to light.

Wise people do what we can to care for our various body parts. In a similar way, Jesus' followers do what we can to use the gifts God gives us to care for the other parts of Christ's body that are our fellow Christians. In fact we long to use God's gifts to us for the sake of all of our neighbors. This is the natural, logical outcome of the world of grace in which we move. We do what we do not to sacrifice in order to behave as God would have or so God can like us. That is well taken care of. We live our lives as the organic consequence of Grace, gifted and gifting other in the name of the one who makes us one, Jesus Christ. In this way how can we be any less or fail to bring praise to the God who meets in, through, and out of grace.

May we know God's inviting grace, hears its call, and answer the best we can when we are invited to the dance of God's creation, creating still. Amen.