

Genesis 4:1-16

¹Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain (possession/smith-Kenite), saying, 'I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.' ²Next she bore his brother Abel (breath, vanity). Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. ³In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ⁶The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.'

⁸Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' (i.e. away from observation) And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. ⁹Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' ¹⁰And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! ¹¹And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand (i.e. both you and the ground are infected). ¹²When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.' ¹³Cain said to the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear! ¹⁴Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.' ¹⁵Then the Lord said to him, 'Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.' And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. ¹⁶Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Psalms 51:10-17

¹⁰ **Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.**

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³ **Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.**

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ **For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.**

¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Mark 12:28-34

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' ²⁹Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰**you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.**" ³¹The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' ³²Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; ³³and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbor as oneself",—**this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.**' ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, '**You are not far from the kingdom of God.**' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

THE POINT OF SACRIFICE

We're in our third week of the "Rise Up" worship series where our focus has been on fundamentals of our Christian faith; traditionally the fifty days after Easter were spent expounding the key points of Christian doctrine to the new 'converts.' Most of us here have grown up in the church, and so you might think that it's unnecessary for us to be re-hashing these fundamental points of Christianity, but from the conversations I've had with many of you and also from my own experience in growing up in the church, I realize that there is a lot of confusion about so many of these fundamental notions, or "doctrines" if you will. And so I think it's well worth our while to examine them more closely so that we can gain some clarity, and with greater clarity comes better grounding in your belief and thus better discipleship.

We started two weeks ago looking at the concept of salvation, and I emphasized that God is not simply interested in teaching you some doctrine that secures your place in heaven when your time on earth ends. Rather, God is interested in the quality of the life that you live NOW. So salvation is what we experience in this life when we are released from a bondage to fear which so often leads us to sin – we are freed for joyful obedience in this life, and thus our eternal life starts in the present, not the future. Last week we looked at suffering, noting that suffering is inescapable and often inexplicable, but that our experience of God's love poured down upon us through the Holy Spirit helps us to see suffering not only as something we can bear but something that can actually strengthens us and prepares us as disciples of Jesus Christ. For more detail on both salvation and suffering, you can find the sermons on our website.

Today we examine the concept of SACRIFICE, and I'd like to begin by noting that here in front of us, in this church and in most every church we find an altar, which in ancient days was the place where sacrifices were offered to God, and the altar was often a very bloody place because animals were chopped up and burnt here. That causes a great deal of revulsion among many modern folks – especially among us city folks, because most of us are not hunters, and even if we eat meat we get it in a form that hardly resembles the living animal from which it came – steaks are neatly wrapped in cellophane with little absorbent pads underneath to soak up any excess blood. A chicken is plucked, decapitated and gutted. Thus animal sacrifice seems both foreign and grotesque to us. For many this is just another wedge between the New Testament and the Old Testament; the old seems so barbaric with all the God-sanctioned slaughter going on.

Yet the New Testament is not so clean and tidy either; if we look upon Jesus as a human sacrifice made by the Father on behalf of humanity for the sins of the world, we're still left with the question, "why?" Why would our God of love and grace and compassion require blood to be spilled and a life to be taken, and not just any life but an innocent life, in order to make sinners clean again? We can't indict Jesus for devising this cleansing formula, but what about the Father? Why does he require that Jesus die such a hideous death? Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if it is at all possible, take this cup from me." Why did the Father require Jesus to suffer and die as a sacrifice? Was there no other way? I've heard what is called the substitutionary atonement theory, that a perfect sacrifice was required for our sins, and because there are no perfect human beings Jesus was the only sacrifice that fit the bill, but that doesn't get to the root question; "Why was a human life required in order to make atonement?" Why were the lives of innocent animals required as atonement for human sin? And why did a human being have to die to make everything okay between us and God?

I don't have an answer for that. I don't like the substitutionary atonement theory of salvation, and I don't know if it was really God's idea that animals be killed to atone for our sins. But it is a fact that five or six thousand years ago humans sacrificed animals to gods, and sadly they sacrificed humans, too. Two things that distinguished the sacrificial rituals of the Jews from those of other religions was that first, Jews did not sacrifice people (the story of Abraham and Isaac makes that point quite clear), and second, Jews did not make sacrifices in order to appease their God. It wasn't about feeding a bloodthirsty God; rather it was about restoring a relationship with God. Blood was considered a purifying agent, and in Judeo-Christian theology, human sin was the obstacle that stood between man and God, thus the blood of animals was considered to be the means through which human fellowship with God was restored. Perhaps this is why in the story of Cain and Abel God looked more favorably upon Abel's offerings than he did upon Cain's. This story may provide us with a summary explanation of the need for the ancient Jew to make animal sacrifices since it comes right on the heel of the story of Adam and Eve's first transgression – our relationship with God was broken, and cleansing blood was required to bring us back into a right relationship with God in the mind of ancient Jews. Early Christians recognized Jesus as the final and perfect sacrifice; his blood thus

making eternal atonement for our sins and restoring us once and for all to a right relationship with God. As gory and as primitive as ritual sacrifice appears, the intention was good.

But like so many rituals that religions adopt, people forget the intention of the ritual and think the ritual itself has some magic properties to it. The ritual is a symbolic act that represents our desire to right something that was wrong. Simply going through with the ritual doesn't solve the problem. Making a sacrifice doesn't just make us right with God, and this is the problem that the psalm we read is referencing, in verses 16-17. *It's not the burnt offering itself that pleases God; it's the heart that is broken and contrite that makes the sacrifice that pleases God.* Jesus makes the same point when he knocks over those tables in the Temple, that act that drew the most attention to him and led directly to his arrest and execution. In our story from Mark's Gospel we meet a scribe, a lawyer, who recognized the same problem that the psalmist and the prophets and Jesus were addressing, *that mechanical sacrifice meant nothing to God. What God wanted was a heart that desired a restored relationship with him.*

And Jesus makes the point that a restored relationship with God cannot be accomplished simply by purchasing an animal and having its blood spilled on an altar. A restored relationship with God can only be accomplished when our hearts really want a restored relationship with God.

Furthermore, a restored relationship with God can only be accomplished when we have a restored relationship with our neighbors, hence when the scribe asks Jesus about the greatest commandment, Jesus answers with two commandments; love God and love neighbor. And in order to qualify that love, scripture says we should love God with **all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength**. Because anything less is not perfect, and therefore not enough to restore the broken relationship we have. And if we are to love God in such a perfect way, can we love our neighbor any less? Clearly not; we must love our neighbor with that same intensity, to that same degree. Thus the psalmist writes, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart."

The question we should ask ourselves is, "Have I been making ritual sacrifices to God without a broken and contrite heart?" Do I think that it's all about doing good here and there, coming to church now and then, taking Holy Communion from time to time, putting a little money in the offering basket, espousing a doctrine in the belief that all these "sacrifices" will appease God? Am I just going through mechanical motions in the belief that something magic will occur and make everything right between me and God? Or do I come to God in contrition? Do I come in repentance with a heart that is hardened toward my neighbor? Do I really want a restored relationship with God if it involves a loving relationship with my neighbor? This is the essence of what it means to sacrifice. When "we bring the sacrifice of praise" we are giving God our hearts and our voices and our energy – it doesn't matter what we sound like to others in the church; what matters is that we give our whole selves to God, whether we can sing or not. We are raising up all we are in love of God and in love of one another.

I don't believe that God ever found anything to celebrate in the spilling of blood, either human or animal blood; I think we had good intentions. I think that animal sacrifice was a human choice. We believed that shedding blood would best express our desire to set things right. And of course the blood itself could never in and of itself set things right. So if I think of Jesus' death as sacrificial, I prefer to see it as God's sacrifice to us, his sincere expression of his desire to have a restored relationship with us. But it wasn't God wielding a knife over his Son; it was God willingly offering himself to us. You and I wielded the knife in order that we would see our own transgression and God's love would truly be poured out for us.

Aside from a broken and contrite heart, what is the best sacrifice we can make to God? Love our neighbor, for this is God's desire for us. Jesus says, "Inasmuch as you have done this for the *least* of these you have done it for me." That's the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart, a heart that is made of flesh and not of stone, a heart with God's law written upon it. May our sacrifices be authentic, well-intentioned, and reflect our love for God who sacrifices himself for us. Amen.