

The Third Sunday in Lent

Ephesians 5:1-9: "To Whom Do You Make Sacrifices?"

March 14/15, 2020 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Hold us close to Yourself, and draw us to You, Lord Jesus. Grant us grace to walk in love from a sanctified heart as dear children. Keep us from all uncleanness in spirit and words and life and deeds. Help us live as befits Christians, and let all the world see that there is a holy people on earth. Lord Jesus, have mercy, for we are called by Your name. Amen. (Laache, *Book of Family Prayer*, p. 227)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fifth chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. / But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true). ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who freely gives you His inheritance of eternal life, honor, and glory, dear fellow redeemed:

We are in the middle of an unprecedented health crisis that has schools, businesses, and individuals taking drastic measures to avoid the spread of a virus. On the positive side, we see great cooperation happening in our communities and country. We have a greater appreciation for the work done by medical health professionals. We are more thankful for the little things we often take for granted. On the other hand, many are filled with worry and fear. People are "panic buying" and thinking more about self than neighbor. They are irritated that the way of life they value and the things they like to do have had to change.

What god does the world look to at a time like this? There are many of them. Some look to the god of self, trusting that their own efforts and precautions will make them safe and keep them alive. Some look to the god of medicine, expecting that doctors and nurses will cure them if they get sick. Some look to the god of government at the local and national levels, waiting for the perfect plan of care and treatment that will get us out of this trouble. Others don't know what

they will do without the god of sports since competition at all levels has been suspended. Many of course also look to the God of heaven to take care of us and end this threat.

Whatever or wherever our god is, that is where we are willing to make sacrifices. If what I care most about is myself, I will be willing to sacrifice everything else around me. If it is medicine, any cost for care is worth it. If it is government, it will receive my full attention and trust. If it is sports, that will get my extra time and resources. All people make sacrifices to preserve the things they care about.

But what the world does not realize is that any sacrifice that is not made out of love for God and neighbor is a sacrifice made to the devil (1Co. 10:20). There is no neutral worship. Either we worship the true God and honor Him in what we think, say, and do, or we worship the devil and do the things he wants.

As baptized children of God, we are called to worship Him only and to offer Him the sacrifices of prayer and thanksgiving and a godly life. In today's text the apostle Paul writes, *"be imitators of God, as beloved children."* How are we to imitate God? The verse just before this says, *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you"* (Eph. 4:32). We imitate God by humbly serving others and by being eager to forgive those who wrong us. This is how we *"walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us."*

The devil wants us to do the opposite of this. He wants us to put ourselves first, to force others to serve us, to satisfy our own desires. This is what people do who engage in *"sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness."* They are not driven by what God says or what is good for their neighbor. They are driven by what they want. They don't realize that this is what the devil wants too. The more he can keep them thinking about themselves, the less they will be focused on God.

We can all think of people who have fallen for the devil's temptations in this area. In fact I am almost certain that each of us here has an unmarried family member, friend, or neighbor who is currently living with a significant other as though they were married. This is sexual immorality. Our culture considers this an acceptable practice, but God calls it a sin.

You may not do this yourself, but what about the other things Paul mentions: *"filthiness," "foolish talk,"* or *"crude joking"?* This includes things like pornography use or sharing pictures you wouldn't want anyone to know about, romance novels where sexual immorality is depicted in words, repeating dirty jokes, listening to and singing along with immoral song lyrics, and gladly participating in gossip about the personal details of other people's lives. These are all things the devil wants us to engage in. But Paul says they are *"out of place"* for Christians. They are means by which the devil would coax us from faith in Jesus.

One way to determine whether or not something is pleasing to God is to think in terms of the Old Testament sacrifices offered up to God from an altar. God did not accept sacrifices with imperfections and blemishes. The animals had to be healthy and clean in appearance. The grain offerings had to be from the best part of the crop. These sacrifices given gladly from the heart pleased the LORD.

So you could ask yourself: Am I willing to set these words about someone on God's holy altar – am I speaking as honestly and kindly as I can? Am I willing to offer up these things I am doing—are they done out of love for Him and my neighbor? Am I willing to give these thoughts as a holy sacrifice to Him?

There are many things we do, say, and think with a clear conscience, things which we gladly dedicate to God's glory. These fruits of faith are a pleasing sacrifice to Him, and we also are blessed through them. But not everything coming from our hearts and minds, our hands and mouths is acceptable to Him. These things may please the devil, the world, and our own flesh. But they do not please the LORD. They are unholy sacrifices that give off a displeasing aroma before God and among our fellow Christians.

The life of an unbeliever can only produce such displeasing sacrifices. Paul writes that they have *"no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God,"* and *"the wrath of God"* will come upon them. We are not unbelievers, but we have often sinned in many of the ways they have. How do we avoid the same fate because of our sins?

When we are troubled by the things we have done, when we regret the sinful sacrifices we have made, God calls us to repent. He urges us to expose our sins to the light. This is what Paul told the Ephesian Christians in the verses immediately after today's text: *"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light"* (Eph. 5:11-14).

Through repentance, acknowledging our wrongs, we expose our sins to the light. The devil works in the darkness. He wants to keep us in the darkness too and tries to convince us that the best thing to do is to try to hide our sins, deny them, blame others for them. But we cannot hide anything from the living God, and it doesn't do any good for us to try. After King David was convicted for his many and serious sins, he wrote of God's mercy toward the repentant: *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise"* (Psa. 51:17).

God does not despise your sacrifice of a broken spirit and contrite heart, because Jesus paid for all sin. Your unkind or crude words, your immoral actions, your foolish and impure thoughts – all of these were placed on Jesus. He was perfect in every way, free from any blemish on His record. And He willingly offered Himself up to suffer and die in your place. His sacrifice fully atoned for your sins, every single one of them. Because of this, you are clean in God's sight.

Today's text says that *"Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* His *"fragrant offering and sacrifice"* overcomes the unpleasant aroma of sin. Jesus' sacrifice, and not our sins, is what our heavenly Father sees when we look to Him in faith. The gods of this world cannot save us from our sins. They cannot promise any comfort or help in times of trouble. The devil wants people to care only about themselves and to act desperately when their way of life is threatened.

But the true God loves us. He sent His Son to redeem us, so that we would be comforted in this life and have the sure confidence of life after this one. As long as we are here, He promises that

He will “guard and keep us so that the devil, the world and our own flesh may not deceive us nor lead us into misbelief, despair and other shameful sin and vice” (Explanation to the Sixth Petition). The merciful Lord is with us no matter our trouble, whether that be a widespread virus or anything else. He will either deliver us from the threat, or He will use it to bring us to Him in heaven.

For these great mercies, especially the sacrifice of His only Son for our salvation, our Lord is worthy of the best sacrifices we can make to Him. These are the sacrifices of a repentant heart, a humble faith, and a God-pleasing life.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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