

Church of God, The Eternal

P. O. Box 775
Eugene, Oregon 97440

Raymond C. Cole
Director
Bryce G. Clark
Asst. Director

Offices in:
Canada
Philippines
Switzerland

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Dear Brethren,

Pursuing our spiritual calling and living up to our obligations before God demands the willingness to sacrifice. Israel attempted to sacrifice physically through mandated statutes and judgments, but not from the heart. They did not have access to the spiritual dimension of the law or possess the revelation to understand God's perfect plan for man's salvation. Nevertheless they were promised abundant physical blessings if they would fear God and humbly submit to His will.

Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he swore unto thy fathers: And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which he swore unto thy fathers to give thee. Thou shalt be blessed above all people: there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle. And the Lord will take away from thee all sickness, and will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which thou knowest, upon thee; but will lay them upon all them that hate thee (Deut. 7:12-15).

Because they were carnally minded, Israel never realized the fullness of those promises. They were not willing to perform consistently the things God required of them (including observance of the Sabbath and holy days), and by their failures wrote indelible lessons for us in these last days.

We are likewise required to perform sacrifices acceptable before God, but our obligation is not fulfilled with animal sacrifice or strict letter obedience to physical statutes. Christ magnified the intent of the sacrifices by revealing their true spiritual significance. He not only upheld the need for physical obedience to the law, but expanded the Ten Commandments to a new dimension: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say

unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. . ." (Matt. 5:21–22). "Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:35–40). Fulfilling those two great commandments of love requires great sacrifice on our part, and far more than just a ritualistic approach. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your [spiritual] service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:1–2). We understand the true requirements of the law today by revelation—that we not only observe God's sacred commands physically, but moreso we obey from the heart, in the spirit.

For purpose of this writing, we will focus on one element of that second great commandment, love toward neighbor, and identify specifically what is required in making appropriate spiritual sacrifices before God.

What Principle of Sacrifice Did Christ Teach?

The gospel that Jesus Christ preached included a blueprint for the proper relationship among the called and chosen of God. In fact, He taught that the proof of our identity as His people would be found in the fruits of our love, one for another. "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34–35). That love is not the love which is professed in the hearts and minds of men. Christ defined it as the same love He has toward each one of us—a perfect love. Christ's love was proven through His willing sacrifice for us as a sin offering. There is no greater sacrifice recorded in history than that which He made for us through His crucifixion and death. So also does God require that same spirit of sacrifice from each of us in our relationship with one another; that is, if we desire to be a part of His chosen.

That sacrifice can readily be made in the exercise of mercy and longsuffering for the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also" (I John 4:20–21). *Here we see* that those two great commandments are interrelated. We must love God, and we must love our neighbor as ourselves. But if we cannot properly fulfill the command to love our neighbor, we have already eliminated the possibility of fulfilling the first command, love toward God. No matter how much we may

try to cultivate a close relationship with our Heavenly Father directly, if we fail to properly serve our brethren through mercy and longsuffering, we have automatically broken the first command and failed to show proper love toward God. "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Mic. 6:8).

Christ's Examples of Sacrifice Through Love and Mercy

Jesus Christ did not just preach a commandment to love and sacrifice for one another; He demonstrated it through personal example.

And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? . . . So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her . . . When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more (John 8:3–5, 7, 10–11).

Christ was the Word made flesh—the personification of the law—yet a significant element of His perfection included mercy toward some who had broken that same law. He showed by example it is not contradictory to uphold the law and grant mercy to weak brethren at the same time.

He further expounded our responsibility toward one another in this parable:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me (Matt. 25:34–40).

Is it not likely many of the trials experienced by the brethren in this parable were penalties brought on by personal weakness? Yet those who were approved of God showed mercy to them all the same. Those who were condemned in the judgment for lack of mercy (Matt. 25:41–46) likely felt some of those weak brethren deserved the price they were paying and felt justified in withholding compassion.

And what did Christ teach about our responsibility to forgive one another for personal offenses? "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:21–22). This example describes our duty to forbear the weaknesses of our brethren, even when we are taken advantage of. To be able to absorb such an offense and respond with mercy and compassion requires great personal sacrifice—a spiritual sacrifice indeed.

Such sacrifice will never be offered by anyone led by a carnal mind.

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt (Matt. 18:23–27).

This act of mercy could only be made by our Heavenly King, or one in whom His Spirit reigns.

Obstacles to Willing Sacrifices of Mercy and Longsuffering

Our natural minds demand justice, retribution for wrong, and often seek a public hearing to solicit support and generate sympathy for ourselves. Little children show us the best example of that carnal inclination. They exhibit these traits very openly. Adults exhibit these very same characteristics, but are usually more clever at concealing personal agendas through various deceptions. If we catch ourselves demanding a price for a brother's offense against us, and feel the natural exhilaration when the carnal desires are fed through retribution, do we recognize it as a weakness and lack of use of the Holy Spirit? Do we become cognizant that Christ taught a different response? If we act acceptably in the Holy Spirit by making a true spiritual sacrifice, obedience will be difficult and will grate against our natural minds. The carnal mind will urge us to give it release, but the Spirit will prevail in an act of mercy and kindness. If we are fulfilling the command of God to sacrifice for one

another, we should feel like we are going through a battle—a battle of Christ’s mind in us against our flesh, with His meekness prevailing. If instead the end result is a satisfied feeling that we "won" or had our say, it is very likely we bowed to the flesh instead of the mind of Christ.

Another significant obstacle to practicing true personal sacrifice through mercy is a failure to recognize *our own need* for God's mercy. We have all been taught we are guilty before God and require His forgiveness, but if we periodically find ourselves praying for forgiveness in generalities only, it may be we are not focusing enough on our specific sins to recognize them. When we truly see ourselves in the wretchedness of the flesh and can list before God the instances when we daily gave place to those carnal pulls, we are then more likely to make a genuine appeal to our Father for mercy, knowing we are truly guilty of the death penalty, and needing His grace (unmerited pardon) for redemption. Notice the following example:

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted (Luke 18:10–14).

If we truly recognize our own inadequacies to this extent, are we not more likely to feel genuine love and compassion for our brethren in their weaknesses?

Something else that can limit us in offering true personal sacrifice in mercy towards others is a fear of condoning sin. We know we are in a battle to come out of the world, to be acceptable in God's sight, and we must be ever-vigilant against compromise. At the same time, God also requires us to know the difference between *condoning* sin and *forbearing* the weaknesses of our brethren. If we are indifferent toward sin, lacking respect for the authority of God's law, we err. But if we are rigid and unmerciful toward His children, we err just as much. Christ's example of mercy toward the adulteress, quoted above in John 8:3–11, can be matched with many other examples of the proper perspective. The greatest single example of mercy and love is expressed in some of Jesus Christ's final words before giving up His physical life on the stake. "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do . . ." (Luke 23:33–34). Is there any greater reproach than to have spurned and rejected the Savior? Yet even this transgression was forgiven in His ultimate sacrifice. Since each one

of us is guilty of His blood, even as those who were physically present, it should touch each of us very personally. If God can forgive each one of us for the daily sins which make us worthy of death, and such mercy does not compromise His perfect law, why, then, should we be concerned that showing forbearance for one another will in any way compromise that same truth? "But after that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:4–6). "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye" (Col. 3:12–13).

Penalties/Rewards for Merciful Sacrifice

Just as the nation of Israel enjoyed blessings from God for obedience to physical laws, and incurred penalties for violating those same commands, so we too are subject to benefits or penalties depending on our level of spiritual sacrifice. If we truly love that revealed way of life and prove it through willing sacrifice for one another, following Christ's example, we are afforded incredible mercy by our Heavenly Father. "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7). "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matt. 6:14). Conversely, if we fail to recognize our own personal need for God's mercy and approach our brethren with hardness and legalistic expectations, we are building the punitive framework by which God will certainly judge us. "But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:15).

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses (Matt. 18:28–35).

From this example we might assume every called servant who fears God would diligently look for opportunity to sacrifice for the brethren. So why then might we continue to struggle with fruits of hardness within the church? Is it not in part because our carnal natures continue to war within us and seek personal honor for ourselves? Even though Christ's disciples walked with Him and sought to be faithful, their natural natures generated problems. "Then there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a child, and set him by him, And said unto them, Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me receiveth him that sent me: for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great" (Luke 9:46–48). Do we not share the same natural proclivities with those original disciples? If we feel hurt or dishonored by one of our brethren, do not our carnal minds resent it? The fact that we technically understand the examples of Christ's mercy and forbearance, having been taught them for many years, does not mean it is easy to practice that level of mercy. In fact it is so difficult to subjugate our carnal natures, that it is perhaps one of the greatest battles we will fight in this lifetime. We have also seen it is a battle we absolutely must win if we want to receive our eternal reward from God.

Just as ancient Israel was required to obey commands that were extremely difficult to fulfill, so are our spiritual obligations to sacrifice today just as demanding. But we have been blessed with the knowledge of the purpose of that body of law. Israel did not understand that those commands painted a picture of the plan of salvation. But we not only understand that purpose, but have access to the power of God's Holy Spirit through which we can learn to obey and properly sacrifice before Him. If we recognize our own frailties and truly approach God in a contrite spirit, as that realization of personal unworthiness unfolds it becomes so much easier to develop tolerance for the weaknesses of others. If we fully understand we are unworthy even to draw our next breath, let alone have God's personal intervention and mercy in our lives, will we not also appreciate fully the opportunity to have a place within the body of His chosen people? And if we truly appreciate that calling and feel properly thankful for it, will we not be inclined to show mercy to those brethren God has blessed us to join?

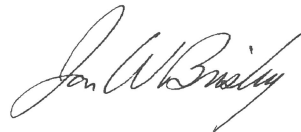
Whenever we are faced with a negative situation involving other people, we hold a golden opportunity to practice that sacrifice Christ showed us. In fact, interaction with others affords us a great catalyst for spiritual development. If we will see those challenging moments as an opportunity to exercise patience, mercy, and longsuffering, it will certainly help us to properly respond more often.

"And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? . . . Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall

hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:16, 21–23). This man was not willing to make a sacrifice of his physical wealth to have treasure in heaven. In the end, he loved his possessions more than that which Christ offered. We also possess "wealth" in the flesh, especially concepts of mind that we personally value. We are each rich with carnal impulses and philosophies we carry within us. In that sense Christ speaks to us all the more saying go and sell that thou hast (our desire to be honored among men) and give to the poor (sacrifice for those with whom we come in contact). He wants each of us to lay down our demands for recognition and fair treatment and be willing to offer ourselves in humble service, as He did through His ultimate sacrifice.

The way to amass treasure in heaven and confirm our place in God's eternal family is through personal sacrifice now. This includes obedience to the physical laws we have received, but, even more, obeying the spiritual intent of these commands. Four of these commands define love toward God, and six define our responsibility toward each other. In every case great sacrifice is required to fulfill His will. Since we all need God's mercy for hope of salvation, assuring that same mercy will be available to us is critical. And since we know that mercy will be granted to us as we have granted it to others, is there any doubt where our focus should be as we prepare for the return of Jesus Christ? If we truly love that way of life we have been given, we will hold fast to that revealed doctrine without compromise and we will demonstrate the fruits of the Holy Spirit by our example of sacrifice, one for another. These will be the tests of our authenticity as the called and chosen of God.

Your humble servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Jon W. Brisby