

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2026

Text: Romans 11:33-12:8 (Epistle)

Other Texts: Isaiah 51:1-6 (Old Testament); Matthew 16:13-20 (Gospel)

“Saved By Jesus’ Sacrifice, We Offer Our Bodies as Living Sacrifices”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Under the old covenant there were a variety of sacrifices, including burnt, grain, peace, thank, sin, and guilt offerings. And while there were a few exceptions, such as the grain offering, the vast majority of these required the priest to sprinkle an animal’s blood and burn its flesh on the altar of burnt sacrifices. In other words, the sacrificial animal ended up “very dead,” a constant reminder to the Israelites that their sins deserve death, that only by the shedding of blood can there be forgiveness of sins and, most graciously, that God had given a substitute to shed its lifeblood in their place.

But the fact that these sacrifices had to be repeated, with two lambs sacrificed every single day at a minimum, the Lord was also teaching them that the blood of animals could not actually atone for the sins of humans; *their* sins. That would have to be taken care of by the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God, His Son with a true human nature who could truly be humanity’s substitute, whose pure, holy, divine blood could truly take away the sin of the world as a whole, and the sins of each individual who make up the world. Like the sacrifices of old that pointed to His sacrifice, all those that He fulfilled, so the sacrifice of this Lamb required blood to be shed, *the death of the sacrifice*, there upon the altar of the cross.

Dear Christians, a sacrifice kills the one who is sacrificed, whether animals of old that pointed to Christ, or the sacrifice of Christ Jesus Himself. That’s why it seems a bit odd when St. Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”¹ How can one be a living sacrifice? What does that mean?

To begin, remember what has already been said. The sacrifices of old were both Law and Gospel. On the one hand, they pointed out the reality that sin not only brings death, not only deserves death, but sin and sinning is *actively working to achieve and earn death*, as Paul has written, “the wages of sin is death.”² But on the other hand, the sacrifices also showed that God provides a substitute to die in their place, fulfilled in the death of His Son. But now with Jesus’ sacrifice, no further sacrifice for sin is needed. As it is written in the book of Hebrews, “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”³ Death, whether of animals or people, is no longer needed for Christ Jesus has fulfilled the Law’s demands for us. We do not need to pay for our sins by dying as a sacrifice, (we couldn’t pay for them anyway!), but instead we are *to live for Him*! But this living *is* a sacrifice. Yes, it even entails death.

¹ Romans 12:1 (*emphasis added*). All quotes are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² Romans 6:23a.

³ Hebrews 10:10.

In baptism, we were united to Christ Jesus, united to both His death and resurrection, therefore dying and rising to life as well.⁴ While this is mystical language, it is not merely symbolic; it is no mere metaphor. Holy Baptism is where God acts, giving us the new birth of water of and the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is, first of all, a cleansing bath which washes away our sins by truly uniting us to Jesus' bloody death as our substitute. In baptism we, with utmost joy and thanksgiving, receive God's glorious promise, "though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."⁵ This, dear Christians, is justification, God's declaration that we are "righteous" in His eyes, for He does not see our sins, but instead sees Jesus' perfect righteousness that covers us. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."⁶ And so heaven's pearly gates stand open wide!

But shall we not speak, walk, and live as those who are purposefully traveling to those blessed gates? Could we who have been rescued from sin's curse of death and hell not then also live as those rescued from its power in us and Satan's rule over us? Truly, could we willingly continue in sin and still receive forgiveness, life, and salvation? St. Paul gives us the answer, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"⁷

We have been *redeemed*, that means, bought back. The price was Jesus' blood shed so that we might not die, but live and live forever. But if one chooses to follow the very path of sin and death that they were redeemed from then they shall not live, but die eternally. This means then that, in order to be a living sacrifice pleasing to God, we are being called to willingly sacrifice ourselves, to die every day to sin and our sinful desires in order to serve Christ.

St. Paul writes, "*Put to death* therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming."⁸ Can faith survive where a person willingly continues in the very things that are bringing God's wrath? No. If faith without good works is dead, then certainly a "faith" in an impenitent heart is nothing more than an apparition, a lie, which tragically is likely deceiving that person more than anyone else.

To be a living sacrifice that is "holy and acceptable to God," St. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."⁹ Do not be conformed to the ways of this wicked, doomed world. The world in the sense of unbelievers and their wicked thoughts and ways, must be shunned. That's why the apostle writes elsewhere, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'"¹⁰ That's why the very first psalm sets the tone for believers by reminding us, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked."¹¹ Christians do not tolerate sin. Such is neither loving God nor the person caught in it.

⁴ Cf. Romans 6:3-4.

⁵ Isaiah 1:18.

⁶ Galatians 3:27.

⁷ Romans 6:3.

⁸ Colossians 3:5-6 (*emphasis added*).

⁹ Romans 12:2a.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:33.

¹¹ Psalm 1:1.

But a living sacrifice is not just to be without the impurity of impenitent sin, but is to be holy. Holy by faith in Christ Jesus whose forgiving washes away our sins. But also holy by faith in Jesus in that He lives in us, that the Holy Spirit has made our bodies His temple, and we live as the new creation He has made us in Baptism. And so we are “*transformed* by the renewal of [our] minds.” The outlook and attitude of one who has saving faith is different than those who do not have it. As Paul says, we test things to know what is good and acceptable and perfect. Not to us. Not according to our thinking or feelings. But to discern the will of God, for only His will is good and acceptable and perfect. Being a Christian doesn’t sanctify our sinful passions, but instead we are sanctified to not follow them, but instead to seek and follow God’s will, which we learn only from the Word. “Blessed is the man...[whose] delight is in the law of the Lord.”¹²

And so we rightly think of the positive side of the Commandments, using God’s name rightly in witness, prayer and praise; gladly hearing and learning His Word; honoring authorities in family, state, and church; forgiveness instead of grudges; instead of following our passions; helping our neighbor’s with their bodily needs from womb to end of life, protecting their possessions and reputation, holding up the sanctity of God’s institution of one-man one-woman marriage until death parts, forgiving and striving for love and reconciliation instead of divorce, being content with what God gives us instead of coveting. And finally, bearing the cross, suffering because we speak and live as a believer, giving up our friendships, family relations, even our lives, whatever is called for all for the sake of confessing Christ. All things like these are being a holy and acceptable living sacrifice unto God as we die to sin and ourselves in order to live for Him and for others according to His holy and perfect will.

Is it not telling that we are to offer our *bodies* as living sacrifices? Truly, only a converted soul, one with faith in Christ can do such in God-pleasing way that is not just some seemingly decent outward motions. But this reminds us that where the body is being used for sin, or just not being used for the Lord, the soul cannot claim to have faith, for the soul is the life force that animates the body in faith and holiness of life. Or in unbelief and sin. Where saving faith is present it will be active in Christian love as the body is offered as a living sacrifice. Then the invisible faith of the soul is made evident through the body’s words and deeds. Then we can let our light shine and be salt to the earth. Imperfect, yes. But not *willful* imperfection. Imperfection that we repent over, turn away from and, forgiven by Christ’s sacrifice, imperfection that we struggle against in the power of the Holy Spirit to keep growing towards perfection. Not because we’ll be perfect in this life, but because saving faith desires to do nothing less!

Thank offerings were a subset of peace offerings.¹³ The peace offering required blood, but the thank offering part did not. How this points to us. It is the bloody sacrifice of Jesus that made peace between God and us by forgiving our sins. We now offer our body, our whole life, as a thank offering to God our Savior, a living sacrifice that honors God’s grace, praises Christ’s salvation, and brings good to others. God grant us to faithfully live as living sacrifices. Amen!

¹² Psalm 1:1.

¹³ Leviticus 7:11-12.