

The Priesthood of the Believer

At a recent men's prayer retreat, I spoke at length on the priesthood of the believer, in three sessions. Since none here were in attendance, I am repeating it here in a condensed form.

In the first session, we covered the Protestant conception of the priesthood of the believer, as a reaction against the abuses of the Roman Catholic system of popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests who were the "spiritual professionals", acting as intermediaries between the "laity" and God. Protestantism believes that we are all priests, as believers, and do not need any man to stand between us and God, and very significantly, it is the responsibility, right, and privilege of every believer to read, study, and interpret the scriptures for himself, and not to rely on human priests to tell us what they think we should know about the Bible.

This conception of the priesthood of the believer is true, but it really doesn't go quite far enough, to let us know exactly how we are to function as priests.

We then looked at the OT system of Levites, priests, and a single high priest, and their responsibilities and functions. There was a need for a more perfect priesthood for two reasons:

1. Human priests were themselves sinners and so had to offer for their own sins before offering for others.
2. There needed to be a constant changing of the priesthood as the old ones died.

When we say that system was faulty, we do not mean that God made a mistake and required a "plan B", but that the whole Levitical system of priests and sacrifices was "typical". By "typical" it is meant that certain things in the OT can be seen (especially in hindsight) as being "types" or models in some way of Christ or things in the NT. They foreshadowed what would more perfectly be seen and experienced in that NT, or in heaven itself.

As NT believers, we recognize that all the various forms of sacrifice and priesthoods were typical, and so fulfilled in Christ (Ps. 110, Heb. 6-10), being a "priest after the order of Melchizedec". A fair amount of time was spent teaching about Melchizedec, and how Christ is now our great High Priest.

If Christ is the great High Priest, what are we? We are not priests after the OT requirements (most of us are not Levites, or even Jewish), but yet we are called to be priests under Christ.

1 P. 2:5 – "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, **an holy priesthood**, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ..."

1 P. 2:9 – "But ye are a chosen generation, **a royal priesthood**, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

Some might wonder **if all the OT sacrifices are done away because they were perfectly fulfilled in Christ, how can we be priests?** Actually not all the sacrifices were done away! The OT has two very general kinds of sacrifice – most obvious are the physical ones (bulls, lambs, goats, birds, grain, etc.), but there were also spiritual ones (joy, praise, thanksgiving, etc.). Christ has without question fulfilled all the different kinds of OT physical sacrifices (sin, burnt, trespass, and peace offerings; the periodic offerings (morning and evening, weekly, monthly, and annual); and the sacrifices of the various feasts and holy days), but the spiritual sacrifices still remain for us to offer.

Hos. 14:2 – "... receive us graciously; so will we render the calves of our lips."

Heb. 13:15 – "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name."

What are examples of non-physical sacrifices?

- **Sacrifices of righteousness**

Grammatically this can mean "righteous sacrifices", in which the physical sacrifices are referred to as being brought with a righteous mind and attitude. If not, they are an offense to God. The OT sacrifices were to be brought with righteous intent - to humbly seek God's forgiveness and cleansing, or to sincerely thank him for all the blessings of life. But I believe that the righteous works of believers themselves (being the fruit of our relationship with Christ) can be considered to be sacrifices. The righteousness that Christ works in our lives return to him as a sweet odor of Christ.

Ps. 4:3, 5 – “But know that the Lord hath set apart him that is godly for himself: the Lord will hear when I call unto him. ... Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the Lord.”

Ps. 51:19 – “Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.” This is after his prayer to be washed and cleansed from iniquity, after asking God to create in him a new heart and a right spirit, and acknowledging the insufficiency of physical sacrifices without a right heart.

See also Dt. 33:19 and Mal. 3:3.

- **A broken and a contrite heart (humility)**

Ps. 51:17 – “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” (compare the Beatitudes, Mt. 5:3-10 – poor in spirit, mourning, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness’ sake)

- **Obedience**

Obedience is perhaps not a sacrifice itself, as much as a condition for making acceptable sacrifice, but there are surely times when obedience requires a sacrifice of our own self-interest.

1 Sam. 15:22 – “And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.”

- **Prayer (as the morning and evening sacrifices)**

Ps. 141:2 – “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”

Ps. 5:3 – “My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up.”

- **Thanksgiving**

Ps. 50:7-15 – God tells Israel that he doesn’t actually need their physical sacrifices, that even though they were to do them, the real issue was in the heart - “Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High: And call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.” Thanksgiving...obedience...supplication...deliverance...God is glorified.

Ps. 107:20-22 – “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.”

Ps. 116:17 – “I will offer to thee the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD.”

- **Praise**

Ps. 69:30-32 – “I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving. This shall please the Lord better than an ox or bullock that hath horns and hoofs. The humble shall see this, and be glad: and your heart shall live that seek God.”

Ps. 50:23 – “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God.”

Jer. 17:24-26 – God promises that if his people would honor the sabbath as he commanded, they would dwell in the land under the leadership of their own kings. “And they shall come ... bringing burnt offerings, and sacrifices, and meat offerings, and incense, and bringing sacrifices of praise, unto the house of the LORD.”

Jer. 33:7-11 – If his people would call upon him, he would pardon them and restore them from their desolation, and they would once again hear “The voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that say, Praise the name of the LORD of hosts: for the LORD is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: and of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the LORD...”

Heb. 13:15 – “By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.”

- **Joy**

Ps. 27:6 – And now shall mine head be lifted up above mine enemies round about me: therefore will I offer in thy tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord.

How can we make such sacrifices?

- With the lifting of the hands – Ps. 141:2 (quoted above)
- With our mouths – Ps. 5:3, Heb. 13:15 (quoted above)
- In holiness – Ps. 29:1-2 – “Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty, give unto the Lord glory and strength. Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness”
- With thanksgiving - Jon. 2:9 – “But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.”

We are to serve God as priests with the whole of our being – body, mind, soul, and spirit.

Rom. 12:1 – “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 reasonable service.”

Our bodies are to be made available to God for holy service to him. This obviously requires our non-physical being as well – our spirit and mind and will and emotions directing the use of our bodies to serve God in holiness and purity and true worship. This is the effect of the first commandment – if we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we will serve him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

If Christ is the fulfillment of the physical sacrifices, but the spiritual sacrifices still remain, does that mean they are our own works? No! Even though they are our own as a responsibility and a privilege, they also are the result of Christ’s work on the cross. 1 P. 2:5 says we are a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices, but that **those sacrifices are made acceptable by Jesus Christ!** Even as redeemed believers, we could not make such sacrifices out of any reformed goodness, but only from Christ. We are not offering our own joy, but “the joy of the Lord” – i.e., the joy that he produces as a fruit of the Spirit. We are offering the praises that arise from our hearts, springing up from the Holy Ghost within. It is a flow of living water. The thanksgiving in our hearts comes from the knowledge and experience of free grace bestowed through Christ, and from our experience as adopted sons of God. Any humility we have can only come from him, and certainly any righteousness and holiness that we can offer is that which is produced by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

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