

A Fragrant Offering and Sacrifice to God

Ephesians 5:1-2

As we have journeyed through Ephesians, God has shown us some beautiful and amazing things about this life that Christ has provided for us! When Jesus enters our lives, He does not leave us the way we were, but begins a work in us that continues for all the rest of the time we are here on this earth. As a result, we are changed, not just in superficial ways that don't count for much, but we are changed and transformed deep in our beings. The change inside of us is to be so dramatic that Jesus even compared it to being "born again." Paul referred to it in Ephesians as "putting off the old self" and "putting on the new self, created to be like God in righteousness and holiness."

As we saw recently, Ephesians 4 quite naturally flows into Ephesians 5. In verse one of chapter five, we find the word "therefore" which points us backward into chapter four. On the basis of what we discovered in chapter four, then, we are to have a certain response. Here is the response Paul says we are to have:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

As we've already seen, God's Word says that we are to "imitate," or mimic, God. The best example of imitating God is in the way that He loves. And what is the best example of the way He loves? The death of Christ on the cross, which became an offering and a sacrifice to God for us. But the *way* that God loves is so different from what we normally see that the Scriptures even use an entirely different word to describe it.

As you have heard perhaps many times before, the Greek language included at least four different words which might be translated "love." Each of them describes love in different forms and to different degrees. But when Paul tells us in verse two that "Christ loved us" he used the word *agape* which refers to a giving, sacrificial love, a love that gives without asking for anything in return, an unconditional love that loves no matter what. This is a love that depends entirely on the one who loves and not on the merit or response of the one loved. A great example in the Scriptures is found in Romans 5:8—"*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" This love is a love that represents "a self-emptying self-sacrifice" (J. D. Watson).

That's the kind of love Paul saw when he thought about Jesus dying on the cross. On the cross, Jesus freely gave of Himself for our sakes. On the cross, Jesus sought our good rather than His own good. On the cross, Jesus made sacrifices on our behalf. On the cross, Jesus gave without asking or seeking anything in return. But pay attention to the two verses in front of us today. The word for "love" is actually used in three different ways here. First, love is used as an

adjective—“*Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.*” The King James simply reads, “dear children,” and in that case it is the word “dear.”

Second, the word love is used as a noun. “*Live a life of love*” or “walk in love” as some versions render it. And third, the word love is used as a verb—“*Just as Christ loved us.*” So we have an adjective, a noun and a verb, all forms of the same word to describe not only the love of God for us, and the kind of life we are to live, but also the supreme example of love when Christ gave Himself for us on the cross.

But let’s break it down some more, to uncover some wonderful treasures God has put here for us. Continue the thought in verse two: “*just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.*” This phrase is used a number of times in Scripture. It describes how Jesus was **given** over to the chief priests and elders of the people to be tried and falsely charged before the Sanhedrin (Mt 26:16,24). It describes how the Sanhedrin **handed** Jesus over to Pilate (Mt 27:2). It describes how Pilate **handed** Jesus over to the will of the people (Lk 23:25). And, it describes how Jesus was **handed** over to the soldiers to be crucified (Mt 27:26).

But don’t miss the truth here that Christ “*gave himself up.*” The cross and the grave were not an accident as far as Christ was concerned. Jesus’ life was not taken from Him. Death was not something given to Jesus against His will. Jesus “*gave himself up.*” It was His decision, His plan, His will. It was His sacrifice and not a sacrifice forced upon Him. Jesus deliberately chose, as Isaiah puts it, to be “*led like a lamb to the slaughter*” (Is 53:7). He didn’t try to escape. He didn’t try to pull away and hide. He was “*obedient to death – even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:8). He willingly drank from the Lord’s cup of wrath (Mt 26:42).

Focus on the next phrase. “*Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.*” Christ’s agape love and Christ’s sacrificial death was **for us**. We turn to what God said through the prophet Isaiah, in 53:5—“*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*”

Christ’s love was for us. Christ gave Himself up for us. **For us!** What thrilling words! What beautiful words! They are thrilling and beautiful just on the surface, but there is a deeper beauty that goes beyond a casual glance at the Scripture. There may be some here today who might sometimes think that I focus too much on the details in the Scriptures, but this is one detail that we better pay attention to! The little word “for” has been called by one Greek scholar “the great preposition of substitutionary atonement.” Here’s what that means: What Christ did, He did for us, on our behalf. The word “for” means “instead of,” so when it says that Christ gave Himself up for us, it means that Christ willingly took our place on the cross, and paid the penalty for our sin, becoming our substitute to pay for our atonement. Do you realize what that means? It means we can have forgiveness, we can have salvation, we can be redeemed, we can have new

life, eternal life. It means our sins are covered and we are washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb! It means all of this if we ask God to forgive us because of Christ's sacrifice.

Consider now not only the life that Jesus sacrificed for us, but consider also what the sacrifice involved. To get to the point where he could die, Jesus had to plan for it. He left the glory of heaven and took on human nature so that he could hunger and get weary and in the end suffer and die. The incarnation was the preparation of nerve endings for the nails of the cross. Jesus needed a broad human back for a place to be scourged. He needed a brow and skull as a place for the thorns. He needed cheeks for Judas' kiss and soldiers' spit. He needed hands and feet for spikes. He needed a side as a place for the sword to pierce. And he needed a brain and a spinal cord, with no vinegar and no gall, so that he could feel the entire excruciating death -- for you. --John Piper

Kenneth Walters spent nearly 20 years in prison in Massachusetts for murder, though he had steadfastly declared his innocence. His sister, Betty Ann Walters of Middletown, Rhode Island, believed in his innocence so much that she put herself through college and law school in hopes of someday clearing her brother of all charges. When she received her degree, she hounded a courthouse clerk until she learned that a box of evidence with her brother's name on it was in the basement. DNA samples did not match her brother or the victim—and Kenneth was set free.

As admirable as Betty Ann's act was, and as great a sacrifice as it was for someone she believed to be innocent, it does not even begin to compare with the sacrifice made by Jesus for us on the cross. And we are guilty!

“The idea of the cross should never come near the bodies of Roman citizens,” said the Roman statesman Cicero; “it should never pass through their thoughts, eyes or ears.” For the Romans, crucifixion was the cruelest form of capital punishment, reserved for murder, slave revolts, and other heinous crimes in the colonies. Roman citizens were beheaded, not crucified. Jews shared their revulsion – “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse,” said Deuteronomy – and preferred stoning when they had authority to carry out executions. From *The Jesus I Never Knew*, by Philip Yancey, p. 200 (Zondervan, 1995).

We have forgotten how horrible the cross was! It took time for the church to come to terms with the humiliation of the cross. Church fathers forbade its depiction in art until the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine, who had seen a vision of the cross and who also banned it as a method of execution. Thus not until the fourth century did the cross become a symbol of the faith. (As C. S. Lewis points out, the crucifixion did not become common in art until all who had seen a real one died off.) (Ibid., pp. 202-203)

These next words are beautiful also, that Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us “*as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*” Those words are also beautiful on the surface of them, and they even roll off your tongue when you say them: “*as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God,*” or in the King James “*as an offering to God for a sweetsmelling savour.*” But friends, they mean much more than that. When we dig deeper, we find that Paul didn’t use these words just because they sounded good. He had something very specific in mind. He was referring all the way back to the time when God first told the Israelites about the different kinds of sacrificial offerings that they should make to atone for their sin.

To fully appreciate and understand what Paul was telling us in Ephesians, we have to go all the way back to Leviticus—yes, Leviticus! When we understand what God said to the Israelites there, we will understand how Christ's sacrificial offering of Himself was a fragrant aroma to God, and we will better appreciate how we are to respond to this Great Love found in God through Christ. Remember how we have said from time to time that the Old Testament and the events in it point forward to Christ? Even the parts of it—such as Leviticus—that we don’t read very often, point to Jesus and the Great Plan of Redemption God had for all mankind.

The first five chapters of Leviticus describe five offerings commanded by God. Only the first three are said to be “sweet-smelling.” First, there was the **Burnt Offering** (1:1-17), which was to be completely burned on the altar. It foreshadowed the complete devotion of Christ and submission to God in giving His life. The Burnt Offering was said to be “*an aroma pleasing to the Lord.*”

Second, there was the **Meal** (or Grain) **Offering** (2:1-16). The one making this offering was to bring fine flour, and pour oil over it, which symbolically represented the sinless perfection of Christ, being anointed by the Holy Spirit. The Meal offering was said to be “*an aroma pleasing to the Lord.*”

When we move into the third chapter of Leviticus, we find the **Peace Offering** (3:1-17), which involved offering an animal without defect. The Peace Offering pointed toward Christ as the One who made peace between God and man, and it, too, was said to be “*an aroma pleasing to the Lord.*”

We need to mention the other two sacrificial offerings just in passing. These were the **Sin Offering** and the **Trespass Offering**, and they were not “sweet-smelling” to God. They also pictured Christ, but they picture Him as bearing our sin, which could never be sweet-smelling or pleasing to God.

But there was a big problem with the Old Testament sacrifices. The blood of bulls and goats and lambs could never completely take away the sins of the people. They only pointed forward

to the day when Jesus would voluntarily give Himself to die a horribly painful, bloody death on the cross.

So the first three offerings under the old sacrificial system were “*an aroma pleasing to God.*” It means that these offerings were pleasing to Him and accepted by Him as being sufficient for forgiveness of sins. This is the same concept that we find in Ephesians 5:2, where the aroma of the obedient sacrifice of Jesus in giving Himself for us on the cross rose up in the nostrils of God and smelled sweet to Him. The same things are said to be true of us. God enjoys the fragrance of complete obedience from His dearly loved children, who love Him so much that they imitate, mimic, Him in the way that they love.

As a former Army Ranger, Seattle pastor Tom Allen described a special connection he felt to the characters in the World War II movie *Saving Private Ryan*:

I was extremely proud - until the last minute of the movie. I was proud watching the Rangers take Omaha Beach. Then they receive a mission to go deep into enemy territory to save Private Ryan. They hit skirmish after skirmish, and some of them are killed along the way. They finally get to where Private Ryan is holed up, and they say, “Come with us. We've come to save you.” He says, “I'm not going. I have to stay here because there's a big battle coming up, and if I leave my men they're all going to die.”

What do the Rangers say? “We'll stay here and fight with you.” They stay and fight, and it's gory and hard, and almost everyone dies except Private Ryan. At the end, one of the main characters - played by Tom Hanks - is sitting on the ground. He's been shot and he's dying. The battle has been won.

Private Ryan leans over to him and Hanks whispers something to him. Everyone in the theater is crying because Tom Hanks was shot; I was crying because of what he said - it was so terrible, Ryan bent down and Hanks said, “Earn this.” The reason that made me angry is no Ranger would ever say, “Earn this.” Why? Because the Ranger motto for 200 years has not been “earn this.” The Ranger motto for the past 200 years has been *Sua sponte*, “I choose this.” I volunteered for this.

If Hanks was really a Ranger he would have said, “*Sua sponte.*” In other words, “This is free. You don't pay anything for this. I give up my life for you. That's my job.” And so when you look at the cross and see Jesus hanging there and hear him say, “I thirst,” you do not hear “Earn this.” You never hear Jesus say, “Earn this.” He doesn't say, “I've given up everything for you. Now you need to gut it out for me.”

He says in effect, “*Sua sponte.* I volunteered for this. You don't have to pay anything for it.” --From a sermon by Tom Allen - Seattle, WA - Seen in Leadership Journal - Spring 2001 (via Dave Aufrance's e-newsletter "Monday Fodder")

Christ loved us so much that He gave Himself as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Such love, the Scripture says, is to be the standard for the way we live. When we love others, and each other, with a self-emptying sacrificial love that puts the needs of others first without thinking about how we are going to be paid back, our very lives become a sweet fragrance rising up to God—and we are being obedient to Scripture in imitating our Heavenly Father, as dearly loved children.