

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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“HAVE YOU EVER SACRIFICED ANYTHING FOR CHRIST?”

Text: “If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.”

- Mark 8:34

I will admit here at the start that the question posed in the title of this sermon has a rather intimidating challenge: “Have you ever sacrificed anything for Jesus?” It is intended to alert and accompany us at the beginning of the Lenten Season, which starts at 12:01 a.m. on this Ash Wednesday morning. Lent is a time the church has long set aside to prepare for the coming of Holy Week and Easter. It is commemorated during the 40 days prior to Easter, plus six Sundays, which technically are not part of Lent. Sundays are always feast days, not fast days. Since the early centuries of the church, Lent has been characterized as a time of self-denial. A fasting period was required of all candidates for membership in the Christian community. That lasted the forty days before Easter, when they joined. The custom spread to include all Christians, who traditionally gave up a favorite food or pleasure, or practice during the days of Lent.

Lent, which derives from the Old English word for Spring, “Lencten”, is also a time to emphasize repentance and the development of spiritual graces. I always recommend that every Christian give up something for Lent, but also to take up some new means of spiritual and moral growth. E.g., if you have not read the entire Bible, cover to cover for a long while, you could decide to read through the Scriptures during the 46-days of Lent, or adopt a daily devotional, or whatever.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, shared by some Protestant Churches, ashes are sprinkled, (technically smudged) on the foreheads of Communicants. That is an outward sign of an inward determination. Sackcloth and ashes in the Bible are the symbols of repentance and humility. When the Priest applies the ashes, he says: “Remember Thou art dust, and to dust Thou shalt return.” The ashes, by the way, are those from the burned Palms which were left over from the previous Palm Sunday.

Forty days were chosen as the length of Lent to commemorate the 40 days during which Jesus fasted after his Temptation in the Wilderness, or the forty days Moses fasted at Mt. Sinai, or even the forty years during which the Chosen People wandered in the Wilderness of Sinai.

So, while a Lenten fast is not usually heralded from non-liturgical free church pulpits such as ours, I encourage each of you within the sound of my voice, to consider some time of self-denial and spiritual self-improvement during the next six weeks.

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But, to the larger topic “Have You Ever Sacrificed Anything for Christ?” Listen again to the words of our Biblical text in Mark: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save his life

will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will find it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul.... Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, ...of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes with the holy angels in the Glory of his father."

Mark 8:34-38.

It comes in three parts, but all three say the same thing: Christianity is not to be a sometime thing. Jesus never deceived or misled his would-be followers. He never promised them a rose garden. Jesus never asked for anything, but that he was willing to do it himself.

In his commentary, Professor Barclay tells of the time when Alexander was in pursuit of Darius. For eleven days his men marched 3300 furlongs. They were tired, hungry, and near dying of thirst. Some Macedonians came by and offered Alexander a helmet full of water. He started to drink it, but gave it back when he looked at his men. "If I alone should drink, the rest would be out of heart."

Winston Churchill also challenged his people during World War II: "All we have to offer is blood, toil, tears and sweat." Or in the Revolutionary War, then General George Washington said to the Colonists: "I offer no easy journey, but a march to the death. We will have no posh quarters, no adequate clothing or provisions. We will be up against superior forces.... But the cause is worth it."

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To deny oneself. Simon Peter once denied his Lord and the cock crowed to remind him. He had said, "I do not know him." That's what denial means. "I do not know myself." It is to ignore the very existence of oneself, so to be devoted to Jesus Christ.

"It was the Lord's intention that those who follow him should not be detached observers of his passion, but men who grow in faith and

understanding through participation in His sufferings." (Barclay)

Sometimes it is denying yourself to follow Christ and the saints in the declaration of your faith. "Be my witnesses," was Christ's command. Jesus never pretended that faith in Him was just one of many possible choices. It's funny... No, it's not funny... I get into a strange mood sometimes when I think about our approach to people of other faiths. Oh, I know that some Christians say everyone else is going to hell.

But the rest of us are so accommodating, so fearful of causing trouble, so casual about our devotion to Jesus Christ that we forfeit our claim on what is precious and exception in Christianity; and, we fail to share the good news of the life we find in Christ, for our mortal days, and more importantly, for all of eternity to come.

Many of us tend to think, and some also say, or at least imply, that it doesn't really matter what a person believes so long as he or she believes in "something." That helps to get you involved in ecumenical dialogue. It helps to make you seem friendly and open to all of God's children. Sane and rational Christian people often say that since we are all on the same road to the same destination, we should all blend on theological stuff together and go merrily down the stream.

But that is not what the Bible says! Jesus never told us to be nice. He told us to be faithful. He never told us to relax; he told us to repent, to refocus our lives on Him and to follow where he leads. In other words, our protection of, and our witness to our Christian faith, cannot be a casual matter. (Confucius added: "Keep an open mind, but don't let your brains fall out!")

We are expected to be friendly wherever possible, and to be respectful of what another believes. Paul in the Book of Acts, Chapter 17, is a good example. Paul had been delivered to Athens by friends who were protecting him on his journeys. He had just

come from Thessalonica (to whom the two letters of Thessalonians were written). There, it says, "he argued with the members of the local synagogue, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead: This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ!" (Acts 17:3).

He never said that they should believe whatever they felt like or wanted to believe. He did not belittle them or berate them or look down on them, he simply told them what he believed about Jesus Christ, and when he did, it says, some of them were persuaded. How will they hear, if nobody tells them?

Then in Athens, Acts 17:22, it says he was provoked because the City was full of idols. He told his story everyday... Before long, they asked him, "What is this new teaching you present?" Paul answered, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way, that you are religious." (They were.) "As I pass along I see many statues and inscriptions to what you believe. I was especially taken, however, with the altar that has this inscription: 'To an unknown God.'" Then (listen) he said, "That which you worship as unknown, I declare unto you. The Lord God who made the world and everything in it...is not far from any one of us. He is present in Jesus Christ whom he raised from the dead."

With that, some mocked; some said "We must hear more about this one day;" but some joined him and believed. He was kind and loving and considerate, but his purpose was not to understand how they felt, he told them what he knew.

Now, do not be misled here, or the usefulness of what we are saying will be so far beyond our reach that we will turn our intellectual heads and walk away. It is not likely that many of us will ever have to carry a wooden cross up a hill and be crucified. It still happens in some parts of the world with missionaries, but not with the most of us.

But, in other ways, I have seen a lot of sacrifice in the world, and so do you. We saw it in the various wars which all of us encountered as we grew up, and as we grew older, too. Soldiers and sailors, armed forces all, who gave up years. Some never returned at all. I have seen sacrifice in behalf of the freedom of the world. I see it in families, too, when a child needs special care and help, or when a husband or wife has an illness. It takes so much extra... I have seen sacrifice, and so have you, all around us.

And I have seen sacrifice in pursuit of excellence. When the Bible says, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends...", it doesn't usually mean a whole life literally, not all at once. Life is lived in minutes, hours and days. Every time you give up some portion of your time for someone else, you are giving up some of your life. That is all the life you have. Once the hour or the day is gone, it is gone for good, forever.

That is what the New Testament is really all about. It is little Mary giving up her childhood, so she can bear the Son of God. What a sacrifice! Then, later, she had to give him up, and she was all alone. Finally, one day she had to watch him die upon a cross. The other name of what is going on is "Sacrifice."

And the disciples, they gave up everything as well. Along came Jesus, and they left everything. Luke noticed that James and John gave up their fishing. Then he adds: "They also gave up their father." Wouldn't that be sad, to have to go away and leave your family? I think Luke was also saying something about himself.

And, of course, it comes to a zenith in the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ: He gave up everything... He gave up marriage, gave up His family, His home, and His father's business. Eventually, as we have said, He also gave his life. So, little wonder that St. Paul says: "I beseech you (what a word!) by the mercies of God to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

And, the question then comes back again: "Have you ever sacrificed anything for Christ?"

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Now, lest you think I am picking on you, let me turn the page: the question is also personal. You speak of you to you. I shall speak of me. When Carlyle Marny visited our spacious dwelling place in Pittsburgh, a church-owned parsonage which was large enough for two grand pianos, and four couches in the living room alone, with huge Grecian pillars holding up the ceiling, an enormous stone fireplace all across the center, with eight bedrooms and seven baths. Dr. Marny walked into my house, he looked around at the pillars and the fireplace, he chuckled and said: "My goodness, Cromie, we give up everything to follow Him!" Touché!

So, the question becomes personal with me: Have I ever sacrificed anything for Jesus Christ? Peggy and I give all that we can to Christian charity. I give all the time that I can muster to do my work as a messenger of Jesus Christ. And yet, in the loneliness of my study last Wednesday evening, when I wrote these words, my answer was "No, I have never sacrificed anything for Jesus, not really." I have everything I need.

Mother Teresa died over a year ago. She went to India to serve the poor, sick and needy. She always bothered me. For example, her Order received a bequest one time of a huge and lovely French mansion. It was quite extraordinary, exquisite, filled with crystal chandeliers, Oriental rugs, carved furniture and all the rest. Mother Teresa went through humbly, as they showed it to her: "Lovely, indeed... quite lovely, indeed..." But when the deed of the property was turned over, she returned and went through the whole house, every room. She had the Oriental rugs removed and the chandeliers, the sconces on the walls, until it was bare, stark and plain. They were sold and the proceeds given to the poor. I don't know if she was right or not. But I am

glad she never came to our house. "Have you ever sacrificed anything for Jesus Christ?"

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The Season of Lent will open on Wednesday. As your pastor and friend, I ask you a little favor. Take something precious in your life, and give it up for forty-six days. It does not matter what it is, except that it be something you will miss, as daily reminder of what Christ gave for all of us. Give up something of a self-denying nature and take up some new spiritual search.

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I do not deal in scare tactics. But I thought I had a little vision through the week, that when I get to Heaven's door, there might be just one question: "Cromie, have you ever sacrificed anything for Christ Jesus?" If the answer is "Yes," good work. But if the answer is "No," I think I would be worried. For now and evermore. Amen.

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(Dr. Cromie concluded the sermon with a request that each worshipper repeat in silence the following prayer: "Dear Lord Jesus, I have promised to serve you. Help me to expand my devotion... Take my life once more... And use it to the Glory of Christ Jesus. That I will be more worthy... In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.")

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