

CALLED TO LIVE SACRIFICIALLY FOR CHRIST

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 12

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Do you think I can do this balancing act? If I want to balance a broom with the brush head up and the top of the handle down in the palm of my hand where do I look? Do I look down at my hand to make sure it is moving correctly? Or do I look up at the broom head? In fact, I look up, never taking my eyes off the head and I just let my hand move automatically. The technique is to always look up! The moment I take my eyes off the broom head I lose control of the balance. Why am I telling you this? Because it gives us the clue as to how we can flourish in our calling as Christians. Always keep your eyes on Jesus. As the writer to the Hebrews said (Hebrews 12:2) *"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith..."* You might remember at the start of the month we looked at the meaning of the name 'Christ'. We saw that it means 'The Anointed One'. It refers to Jesus' 'Office'. It is his title. Jesus is 'The Office Bearer'. He is 'Lord of lords and King of kings'. We are called 'Christ-ians' because "...we share in his anointing". That means we share in his office. That is amazing, and daunting! Now, if we are going to fulfil our calling to be fellow office bearers of 'The Christ', we must always look at Jesus. If we are not constantly mindful of him, we will fail in our office. The Bible is very clear that as believers we are together the body of Christ. We share in all the benefits of Christ, such as his forgiveness, his glory and eternal life. But we also share in his responsibilities. We are the voice and hands of Jesus in our communities. We are to do what Jesus would do if he were living here in the hills. The eternal destiny of others is determined by how they respond to our living the life of Jesus and sharing the gospel.

Now I realise we do not always sit too comfortably with this. There are enough issues and sin in our own lives to make it abundantly clear we are in no way perfect like Jesus. There will be resistance. We will be inclined to wave this off as just not what we are capable of. Represent 'The Christ' in the hills communities? Get real! But, here's the thing, we are not to look at just ourselves and our baggage. That's the mistake of trying to juggle a broom by looking down at our hand. We should be constantly looking up at Jesus. As Hebrews says (Hebrews 12:3) *"Consider [Jesus] ...so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* We are not alone in this work. We *"...share in Christ's anointing"*. That means we have also been *"...anointed with the Holy Spirit"*. It is the Spirit of God that is working through us who gives us the ability to function in our office. Let's look beyond

ourselves. Let's recognize the presence of the Spirit in our lives. And step out in faith and work in his strength.

This morning we will focus on our calling as 'priests'. Let's have a look again at what our confession says. Firstly, referring to Jesus: *"He is our only high priest who has set us free by the one sacrifice of his body and who continually pleads our cause with the Father."* And secondly referring to us Christians: *"I am anointed...to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks"*. Now I can imagine that some might be thinking 'All this talk about priests and sacrifices! What does that mean? Surely not that stuff about the Old Testament priests killing an animal and burning it on an altar? Isn't all that gruesome work of those Old Testament priests finished?' Well yes, and no. Their office, in a sense, remains. But the way of doing that work is different. The basic task of the priest is to represent the people before God. Which is distinct from the prophet, who brings God's Word to the people. The priest basically did two things. First, the priest would offer up the sacrifices brought by the people. The offerings could be a 'sin offering', pleading for the mercy of God. That offering was the giving of a life to bring forgiveness to redeem the life of the people. It was symbolic of Jesus giving his life. It symbolised his suffering of hell to save us from suffering death and hell. The sacrifice could also be a 'thank offering'. It would be thanking God for his provision in the year's harvest. Secondly, the priest in their representative capacity would intercede on the people's behalf by offering prayers for them. The burning incense in the temple was symbolic of the continual prayers of the people going up to heaven. So, note the two key things involved in the priest's role: offering sacrifices and offering up prayers.

The work of giving sacrifices for sin is finished. That was fulfilled by Jesus. No more animal sacrifices are needed because, as the confession says, we have been *"...set free by the one sacrifice of Christ's body."* So, no more sacrifices for sin are needed, ever again. But that doesn't mean Jesus finished his priestly role. As our high priest he *"...continually pleads our cause with the Father."* So that means every day, all the time, Jesus is bringing us, and our needs, our joys, and our sin, before God. Do you realise that? Every time you mess up, Jesus is 'pleading your cause with the Father'. It's not just routine daily prayer. He "pleads" our cause. Every time you battle with stuff, every time you fail badly, you have Jesus himself praying for you. He, himself, is the reminder to God of his suffering on the cross, for you. Even if you don't feel up to pray, or don't want to pray, or forget to pray, Jesus prays for you. Don't ever forget that! Look at Jesus and be encouraged and inspired.

Now as Christians, fulfilling our calling to office, we too, are to be doing the work of 'priests.' As Peter writes (1 Peter 2:9) *"...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy*

nation..." In our office as priest, first, we are to give a sacrifice. That sacrifice is to be the giving of ourselves. Says the confession *"...to present myself as a living sacrifice..."* That echoes Paul's words (Romans 12:1) to *"...offer your bodies as living sacrifices..."* Now note this, we are not giving a 'sin offering'. It is not as if by our good works we make ourselves right with God. That is not only impossible, it is not needed. Rather, we are to give ourselves as *"...a living sacrifice of thanks"*. Ours is a 'thank offering' because Christ has already done it all! I read a big banner on the wall in the Narre Warren church last Sunday, 'There's nothing we can do to make God love us more. There's nothing we can do to make God love us less'. The Old Testament person brought the best of their crops or herd to thank God for all their blessings. The New Testament person gives themselves. We are to give the best of who we are and what we are. The Christian says 'Father, for all Christ has done for me, in gratitude, I present myself to you. Lord, my life, all that I am, and all that I have, here it is. I am totally yours. I offer my dreams and ambitions, my feelings, my joys, my disappointments, my money, my family... Everything is for you to have and use.' That is what we are to offer as priests.

It's clear that presenting ourselves as a 'living sacrifice', implies costly discipleship. It will impact our lifestyles. It is more than giving a few dollars in the collection bag during the morning worship. Or even many dollars through our church contributions. It's about considering our priorities, so we have maximum impact in all our relationships. It's about how we act and speak so the character of Jesus comes out in our families, our workplaces, how we play our sport, whatever. It's even about our goals for retirement. Offering ourselves as living sacrifices may imply that we must take a stronger control on our feelings, our desires, our appetites. It means we recognise we do not just follow our impulses, doing whatever feels good. It's about every thought, every word, and every deed given as an offering for Jesus. Let's be honest. That is costly giving. It's a sacrifice in the real sense of the word. The word 'sacrifice' means 'to surrender, to give up, to forgo something cherished, for someone else.' And there will be many times when we feel like saying 'I'm not going that far. I don't feel like doing that. I'm not going to sacrifice that much.' But remember, we are talking here about our office of priest. This is our calling. It is our responsibility. It is not just a matter of free choice, when we feel like it. Our Prime Minister, our state Premier, your local minister cannot say 'I feel like going on a drinking binge.' They hold office. They have to set an example. They have responsibilities. So do you. You hold office. You also are responsible for all your actions. You represent 'The Christ'.

Remember what Jesus himself said (Matthew 16:24) *"If any one would come after me they must deny themselves and follow me (think of what Christ went through!). For whoever wants to save their life (that is, live for themselves and make self 'number one')*

will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me, (that is, gives their life totally for Jesus) will find it." The key words here are "for me", for 'The Christ'. We give our lives as a sacrifice for Jesus. It is our inadequate way of saying thank you to our Lord who gave away everything for us. Just think of the lifestyle, if I can put it that way, the Son of God gave away for us. As Paul wrote (Philippians 2:6-8). *"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!"* What Jesus suffered in hell for sin was an agony so deep it leaves us in awed silence. Especially at this time of Lent, as we reflect on what Jesus did for us, the only response of the Christian can be 'Here am I Lord. Use me any way you want.' This is what I mean by saying we should always keep our eyes on Jesus. If I think of what Jesus went through, I realize any sacrifice I make is nothing in comparison. Doing things Jesus' way will come much more easily if I start the day in devotions focusing on Jesus and thinking about him during the day.

Now involved in this giving of ourselves for Christ is the second function of the priest, which is praying for others. That includes praying for each other in the church. But also, for people in our communities. Those we work with, those we see on the train, those living near us. We are to take the cause of others, their joys, their problems before God. To use the language of our confession we are to "...plead their cause". We pray for our world and plead for righteousness and justice. We pray for hope and people coming to know Jesus. Like the persistent widow we keep knocking on the heavens door. And not only pray, but in response to our prayers, be willing to give ourselves for God's service to help bring about what we pray for.

When we are pray for others it will affect how we live with them. If you are praying for your workmates, you are also more likely to watch your behaviour with them and think of how you present Jesus to them. Think of how many problems in families or between church members would just about disappear if we prayed for each other. Often, we will have a bit of a gossip session about someone. 'Did you hear what they said? Unbelievable!' Or have a gripe about 'so and so' who did something inappropriate. 'What a nong, how could they do that? Nothing surprises me anymore does it!' Instead of that we should pray for them. We should 'plead their cause'. Watch how your language changes when you pray instead of gossip. When you humble yourself before God in prayer, you are not going to gossip about the other person, are you? Just imagine if Jesus were to treat us like we can so often treat others: 'Oh look Father, they are at it again. Isn't it so typical?! Oh well its their problem.' But he doesn't do that. He

"...continually pleads our cause" before the Father. 'Father I know they have made a mess of things. Yes, they are at it again. But they are mine. I died for them. Forgive them and show them the way with your Spirit. Bring them close to you again, despite it all. Give them courage. Help them change. Please Father, for I love them.' Again, as always, in our praying too, we need to be looking at Jesus.

We live in changing times. A lot of people are struggling, needing hope. They don't trust their politicians. And they have little regard for the institutional church. They won't come to church for answers. What is needed are Christians who live amongst them, who by their lifestyles reveal the wonder of Jesus. We need Christians who will love them and plead for them before the throne of God. That's our calling as office bearers of the Christ. Living sacrificially for the Christ, I make no bones about it, is a costly work. But then so was Christ's priestly work. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, we can be a hope in the hills.