

“Sustained Sacrifice”
Philippians 2:17
July 6, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning with our series in the book of Philippians. Last week we considered Philippians 2:14-18, but we didn’t say much about verse 17.

Our focus this morning will be Philippians 2:17. The whole paragraph is printed for you in the bulletin, but we’ll hear from just verses 17 and 18.

With that said, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

¹⁷ Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. ¹⁸ Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we know that those who walk in the ways of your word are blessed – those who keep your testimonies and seek you with their whole heart.

Lord, make our ways steadfast in keeping your statutes.

Teach us the way of righteousness, we ask in Jesus’s name. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:1-2, 5-7]

Introduction

Our focus this morning is on just one verse. But it’s actually going to take some time to unpack it.

And as we do, what we see is that we are called to live lives of sustained sacrifice together, that look forward with joy.

We are called to live lives of sustained sacrifice together, that look forward with joy.

We're going to break that down together.

But before we do – a note on our first two points.

As I talk this morning about sustained sacrifice, my guess is that most of you will like one point ... and be annoyed with the other point.

Most of you will hear one of those points – on sustainability or on sacrifice – and you'll think "Yes. I'm so glad he's talking about this. People today – or people here – need to hear this point!" And then ... on the other point ... you'll think "Why is he going on about that? People today – or people here – already emphasize that too much."

But the two points need each other.

And on top of that, the point that you need to hear this morning is probably the one of the two that you don't like. So whichever one your knee-jerk reaction is to dismiss ... that's the point I want you to dwell on when it comes time to apply this text to yourself. If you're glad I'm finally explaining sustainability to all the old-time Faith Pres crowd, then you probably need to hear what this text has to tell us about sacrifice. On the other hand, if you're happy I'm finally explaining sacrifice to all those young people who don't appreciate the meaning of the word, then you probably need to hear the implications of this text when it comes to sustainability.

With that said, let's consider how our text calls us to lives of sustained sacrifice together, that look forward with joy.

Sustained

First, the efforts Paul is describing – the efforts at work in his own life and modeled here for us to imitate – the efforts Paul sees as so valuable here: those efforts are sustained.

Now, this is often misunderstood.

Some have seen this phrase "if I am to be poured out as a drink offering" as a comment on the possibility of Paul's execution. [e.g.: Barth, 82]

But Gordon Fee demonstrates how this really cannot be what Paul has in mind here.

For one thing, just seven verses later, Paul says with confidence, in the Lord, that he expects to soon visit the Philippians. Paul seems confident that he is not about to die. And so it seems unlikely that he would be focusing on the possibility of his death here. [Fee, 253]

Second, in multiple places Paul compares his own current sacrifice to that of the Philippians. And there is no evidence that the Philippians expected that they would soon be killed. And so it again seems unlikely that Paul would be speaking here of his death. [Fee, 254]

Third, there is a grammatical point. Contextually, Fee argues, it doesn't seem that Paul is saying "if, as may happen in the future, I am poured out as a drink offering." But instead, the "if" there seems to be intensive, heightening the reality that the thing described is already happening, so that

it means “if indeed, as is the case, I am currently being poured out” then I rejoice. Which, of course, is what he’s doing. [Fee, 252-253]

Finally, as one theologian points out, we should consider the nature of the drink offering itself – the very image which Paul evokes here when he speaks about being poured out. While so many Old Testament sacrifices involved death, the drink offering was especially associated with the work of the worshipper. [Leithart] It was a sacrifice that came from the sustained labor of the worshipper: planting a vineyard, cultivating it, reaping, fermenting and then offering the results of all that work to the Lord.

All of which is to say: in the imagery of being poured out as a drink offering, Paul’s death doesn’t seem to be in view as much as his life and his labors.

Instead of talking about a quick offering, that was only possible in the future at his death, Paul is speaking here about a current and ongoing offering of himself, that is already occurring, through his life and labors. Paul is being poured out as a drink offering – as a sustained sacrifice, through his service to the Lord – that’s what’s in view here.

All of this means that the kind of sacrifice Paul is describing here – the kind of sacrifice he’s modeling for us and calling us to – is not done in an instant – in one great heroic burst ... rather it is something to be sustained over a lifetime: for days, and weeks, and years, and decades ... just as Paul’s ministry was.

But we struggle with that.

Rather than a sustained pattern of service – of pouring our lives out for others in the Lord – rather than that, when it comes to sacrifices, we are more prone to short fits and bursts of service ... followed by crashes, as we become overwhelmed, and we struggle, or we burn out, and then we step back and we withdraw and retreat from ministry. We may do a lot for a short period of time, then very little or nothing for a longer period. That’s the pattern we can often fall into.

But that’s not the pattern Paul is modeling for us here. Paul is calling us to a life of sustained sacrifice.

And it’s that pattern of life that Christopher Ash describes in his wonderful little book *Zeal Without Burnout*.

Ash draws out the fact that there is a difference between a life of sacrifice on the one hand, and a foolish burst of heroism that leads to burnout on the other hand. [Ash, 26]

Christians are called to live sacrificial lives – to pour themselves out for others. But, Ash notes, it’s striking that in Romans 12:1 Paul calls on Christians to be “living sacrifices.” “A ‘living sacrifice,’” he writes, “is a strange expression. It means a sacrifice that goes on and on being offered, so long as life lasts.” Exhaustion, he notes, will stop us from being such a living sacrifice. It’s true that God calls some Christians to be sacrifices even to death. But ordinarily we are called to be living sacrifices. And to do that well, we must be intentional about living out our Christian life in a way that can be sustained.

The kind of self-giving Paul is describing, Ash argues, is a “lifetime of sustainable sacrifice, rather than an energetic but brief ministry that quickly fades in exhaustion.” It is “a marathon, not a short, energetic sprint.” [Ash, 20]

I might go even further and say that the lifetime of sustained sacrifice we are called to as Christians is usually more like a 6-month thru-hike of the 2,600-mile Pacific Crest Trail than it is like the 12-second sprint of the 100-meter dash.

It's a long-distance hike of sustained sacrifice for others, not a short-distance sprint of self-giving.

We are called, Ash notes, to “the sort of self-giving living that God enables us to go on giving day after day.” [Ash, 26] – a life “that combines passionate zeal for Jesus with plodding faithfully on year after year.” [Ash, 14]

And if we fail to recognize this call to sustainable sacrifice, we can end up hindering the Christian lives of others, rather than helping them.

One pastor, who is also a volunteer firefighter, sees parallels between those callings on this theme. He writes: “Obviously you have to push yourself physically when fighting a fire. It’s a stretching experience that is uncomfortable and physically difficult. You have to know your limitations while making the sacrifices needed to get tasks done that must be done.” But, he adds, “it’s foolishness to ignore your limitations, [to] try to be the hero, and cramp up, pass out, or have a heart attack while in a burning structure because you’re beyond the limits of what God has supplied you with the capacity of doing. It’s [...] counterproductive because now you’re no longer effective in fighting fire and the resources that were dedicated to fighting the fire are now dedicated to saving you.” [Quoted in Ash, 25]

To be effective in what God has called us to, we must live within the limitations that God has given us. Yes, we are to work hard, yes, we are to labor diligently, yes, we are to sacrifice. But if we are to do that in a sustained way – in a way that accepts how God has made us ... then, Ash argues, it means we will need sleep, sabbath, friendships, and renewal.

First, if we are to live lives of sustained sacrifice, then we will need sleep.

Andrew Wilson reports that John Stott was once asked what the secret of his Christian life was. Stott’s reply was: “Knowing how much sleep I need, and getting it.”

That, he said, was the secret of his Christian life.

That may sound unspiritual. But it’s not. [Wilson, 64]

God designed us to need sleep. Even before the fall, there was sleep [Genesis 2:21]. And even now, the Psalmist tells us that God gives sleep to those he loves [Psalm 127:3].

God doesn’t need sleep [Psalm 121:4]. But we are not God. [Ash, 47-53]

And so, if you want to live a life of sustained sacrificial service, then you need to sleep. Some of us neglect sleep because we insist on working when we should be sleeping. Others of us neglect sleep because we insist on immersing ourselves in entertainment when we should be sleeping. Still others of us do a bit of both.

But either way, if you want to serve the Lord in a sustained way – on the long-distance thru-hike of this life, rather than for just a momentary sprint, then you need sleep.

Second, Ash points out that if we are to live lives of sustained sacrifice, then we need sabbath.

From creation, God gave one day in seven for worship and rest. And to reject that is folly. [Ash, 57-63]

And yet many of us ... if we don't reject the sabbath as a whole, we can often reject at least half of it.

Some Christians feel like they can set aside the worship aspect, as if that part is optional. Other Christians feel like they can set aside the rest aspect, as if that part is optional.

But we need both if we are going to serve God in a sustained way.

Of course there are sometimes extenuating circumstances. But ordinarily, if by the end of your Sunday – the end of your sabbath day – you haven't worshipped with God's people ... then you're probably doing the sabbath wrong.

And in a similar way, if by the end of your Sunday – the end of your sabbath day – you haven't rested ... if you come to the end of Sunday and you're exhausted ... then you, too, are probably doing the sabbath wrong.

We need worship and rest. And God has especially ordained one day in seven for it.

And so, if you want to serve the Lord in a sustained way – on the long-distance thru-hike of this life, rather than a short momentary sprint, then you need the sabbath.

Third, Ash points out that if we are to live lives of sustained sacrifice, then we need life-giving friendships.

Because God made us for relationships. After making the first man, God looked at him and said: "It is not good that the man should be alone." And that wasn't just a statement about marriage. It was a statement about our need for human relationships – for friendship. [Ash, 65-69]

If you try to live the Christian life alone, you will falter. As the saying attributed to St. John of the Cross goes: "The soul that is alone is like the burning coal that is alone. It will grow colder rather than hotter."

We were made for friendships – and not just friendships where we pour into others, but also friendships where others pour into us. We need life-giving friendships in order to sustain us.

Far too often, when a famous Christian's life falls apart in scandal ... it later comes out that no one really knew them ... no one was really close to them ... no one was a true friend in their life. And the result is disaster.

If you want to serve the Lord in a sustained way – on the long-distance thru-hike of this life, rather than a momentary sprint, then you need friends.

Finally, Ash points out that if we are to live lives of sustained sacrifice, then we need inward renewal.

And we need inward renewal that is both natural and supernatural.

For one thing, we need natural inward renewal because we are natural humans. Each of us has activities in our lives that drain us. And we should. That's part of what it means to live our lives sacrificially.

But since we are limited, and since God has made us as he has, we also need activities in our lives that revive and renew us – that energize us, rather than drain us. It may be time with people, or time on your own, time in a creative pursuit, or time on a special interest, time in life-giving exercise, or time on a hobby. But when we drain ourselves in serving others, we need to revive and renew ourselves as well, if we really do hope to do it all again.

And in addition to such natural renewal, we also need supernatural renewal. We need to come to God and seek the inward renewal that only he can give, through prayer, through the Scriptures, through worship, and through fellowship with God's people. We need to come to God and to his Church to receive his means of grace, if we are going to be sustained in doing the work he has called us to do.

If you want to serve the Lord in a sustained way – on the long-distance thru-hike of this life, rather than in just a momentary sprint, then you need inward renewal that is both natural and supernatural.

Sleep, sabbath, friends, and renewal – four things that we need, that God does not.

And when we recognize that we need these things, and we live in light of these needs, we are declaring to others are reminding ourselves that though we follow God, we ourselves are not God.

And yet ... when we see so many needs around us, some of us can be tempted to act as if we are God – to disregard our limitations and act as if, if we just try hard enough, if we just give up on rest and sabbath, on friendships and renewal, then we can meet all the needs around us. But we can't.

As one pastor has put it: "God has already appointed his Messiah, and he did not appoint you." [Peter Adam, quoted in Ash, 62-63]

Of course we are called to sacrifice for others as we see their needs. But if we are to persist in lives of sacrificial service, if we are to be living sacrifices, if we are to pour ourselves out over decades rather than months, then we must live and serve in light of these needs and limitations.

Some of you need to hear this – not because you should abandon the good ministry work you're doing in your life ... but because you need to make space in your life for sleep, for sabbath, for friendship, and for renewal. Saying yes to those things may mean saying no to some other good things that you're doing. But here you must remember that you are not the Messiah. And perhaps there are some things you do where you're trying to be the Messiah ... and so scaling back a bit on those may be wise.

God calls us to sustained service. That's one implication of our text.

Sustained Sacrifice

But of course the primary emphasis of this text is not about sustainability. The primary emphasis is about sustained sacrifice.

We are called here to a long-term, life-long pattern of sacrificial living.

We are called to be people, who, day by day, week by week, year by year, pour out our lives for others, rather than hoarding our lives for ourselves.

After all, that's what God is like. He is a God who empties himself – who pours himself out, for others. Paul made that very point just a few verses earlier.

And God didn't just pour himself out for the deserving. In Christ, he poured himself out for the undeserving – not only for those who hadn't earned it, but even for those who had earned the opposite sort of response. The Christian God is a God who pours himself out, graciously and sacrificially, for others.

And as his people, we are called to do the same. Do you?

It's worth pausing and asking yourself ... would the people who are closest to you say that while of course you're not perfect ... even so, you are someone who pours their life out, sacrificially, for others?

If you're married, and if they were asked, would your wife – would your husband – say that you are someone who pours their life out for them and for other people ... or would they instead think, perhaps only in their hearts, that actually, you're more often someone who hoards their life for themselves?

If someone put that question to your children ... or to your closest friends ... or to your parents, or siblings, or your fellow church members, would they say that you are someone who pours their life out for other people, even those who don't deserve it ... or would they admit – maybe reluctantly – that you're more often someone who hoards their own life for themselves?

Paul, by his example here, calls us to be people who pour their lives out for others – not who hoard it for themselves.

Now ... if you do that already – if you pour your life out for others, then the call for you is to take seriously the challenge of how you're going to sustain that – how you are going to continue to live that way, as we discussed earlier.

But if you're not someone living that way now ... if you're someone who is more often than not hoarding their life – hoarding your time, hoarding your efforts, hoarding your resources – for yourself, rather than truly pouring yourself out for others ... then the call for you this morning is to seek to repent.

In your friendships, in your family, here in the church, you need to seek to follow Christ and to give yourself more to others – pouring yourself out in order to bless them, as Christ has poured himself out for you.

Take concrete steps to serve and sacrifice. Make commitments. You can begin small. And you should probably seek help – from a Christian whom you know and trust, and who already does this well. But the first step is often admitting there’s a problem. So be honest with yourself. And then, if you are hoarding your life for yourself, take real steps to repent of that.

Paul here shows us that we are called to lives of sustained sacrifice.

Sustained Sacrifice Together

But, interestingly, this is not something we’re called to do alone.

There is actually a striking communal aspect to our text. We see in it that we are called to live lives of sustained sacrifice together.

When we think of sacrificial service ... we tend to think in individualistic terms ... of ourselves or of some great spiritual hero ... serving all alone.

But that’s not what’s pictured here.

It’s noteworthy that when Paul wanted to describe this kind of life, he chose the drink offering as a picture of it.

Because in Old Testament worship, the drink offering was known for being paired with other sacrifices, rather than for being offered alone.

In fact, we see in Numbers 15 and 28 that once they were in the promised land, every animal sacrifice was supposed to be accompanied by a drink offering. [Leithart]

And that’s the image Paul uses here too. It’s not just a picture of Paul, on his own, being poured out. Rather, we read in verse 17 that Paul is being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of the Philippians’ faith. There’s not one sacrifice here, but two. And they’re offered together – the sacrificial Christian lives of the Philippines, along with Paul’s drink-offering of himself. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, those went together – one needed the other.

And the same is often true when it comes to living out our Christian lives. If you are a Christian – if you, in any way, are living a life of Christian sacrifice – if your faith has been offered up to God as a sacrificial offering, like the Philippians’ was ... then there are others who have poured themselves out to make your faith and your sacrificial service possible. Your sacrifice of faith is never made alone. Others have poured into you sacrificially to make your sacrifice to God possible.

But it’s not only that. Because for most of you, there are other Christians, in this room or elsewhere, who are walking by faith, and living for the Lord now, at least in part, because you poured into them – because you were a drink offering on the sacrifice of their faith.

We are not each separate individual cups being poured out before the Lord. Rather, we are being poured into others, as others pour into us, and it’s all offered up as one united sacrifice to God, together.

We are not lone sacrifices. We are not lone-ranger Christians. But we are to live the Christian life together, sacrificing for one another, and sacrificing together for the Kingdom of God: rowing together in the same direction, to glorify God together, and to make disciples for Jesus, and to maintain and mature them in the faith.

What is your place in that joint sacrificial effort? What is your role? What is your place here – both formally and informally – as we seek to do that work together? Our text is a call to action – not to act alone, but to act together. Where will you serve? Where will you join the effort? Where will you both serve and be served, as we offer ourselves up together, to our Lord?

Because what we see here is that we are called to sustained sacrifice together.

Sustained Sacrifice Together, That Looks Forward with Joy

Finally, we see that we are called to lives of sustained sacrifice, together, that look forward with joy.

And that idea of looking forward seems to be inherent in the drink offering that Paul alludes to here.

As one theologian notes, the drink offering was not associated with Israel's time wandering in the desert – but rather with their time in the Promised Land. That's when it was added to Israel's worship. And it's noteworthy that what was added was wine: an “eschatological drink” that “requires time for it to reach its maturity.” [Leithart]

But it was about more than just maturity. It was about future-promised victory. The drink offering would be added to the sacrifices of Israel after their enemies were defeated. And so, he writes: “The drink offering is a promise of eventual victory and settlement in the land.” [Leithart] The drink offering is linked to the fulfillment of God's promises.

And that future-orientation continues today, in the drink offering of the Lord's Supper. As Christ instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, he said to his disciples “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.” The cup that is poured out for God's people is meant to point forward – forward to the great Kingdom Feast, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, that we will enjoy at Christ's return.

And that same future-orientation is present here in our text: Paul speaks of his sacrifice in the context of “the day of Christ” in verse 16 – a reference to Christ's return: his final victory and the rest he will give to his people. And it's in light of this future promise that Paul tells the Philippians in verse eighteen, that even as he is poured out, even as they offer themselves up as sacrifices, they should be glad and rejoice together.

We are called to lives of sustained sacrifice, together, that look forward with joy.

While God gives us many blessings in this life, our hope is not in this life. And it's for that very reason that we're able to make real sacrifices in this life.

Our hope is in the life to come. It's given by grace, and it's assured by Christ's blood.

We work now, we serve now, we sacrifice now, we pour ourselves out now, not to earn that future rest – that future blessing ... but because that future blessing is already promised to us by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Think of it like this: A man who knows that in just a few years in the future he will inherit a billion dollars doesn't need to hoard his nickels and dimes in the present. He can be generous and give in the present, because of the inheritance he knows is waiting for him in the future.

And in the same way, a Christian who knows that in just a few years he will inherit eternal life doesn't need to hold onto his life now in the present, for himself ... he doesn't need to hoard his minutes and hours now, because he knows that infinite life will soon be his. He doesn't need to hoard rest and leisure now, because he knows that perfect rest will soon be given to him.

When you hoard your life for yourself ... you act like you don't really believe that eternity is going to be yours.

But God will fulfill his promises. By grace eternal life is ours. And so we can pour out this mortal life for others because eternal life will soon be ours.

Brothers and sisters, it's because of the promises of the gospel that we can live lives now of sustained sacrifice, as we look forward with joy.

Let's do so together.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Ash, Christopher. *Zeal without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice*. The Good Book Company, 2016.
- Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. 40th Anniversary Edition. Translated by James W. Leitch. Introductory Essays by Bruce L. McCormack and Francis B. Watson. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.
- Leithart, Peter. "The Theology of the Drink Offering." Theopolis. July 17, 2018. <https://theopolisinstitute.com/the-theology-of-the-drink-offering-2/>
- McDonough, Sean M. Introduction and notes to Philippians in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.
- Wilson, Andrew & Rachel. *The Life We Never Expected: Hopeful Reflections on the Challenges of Parenting Children with Special Needs*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.
- Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.