

## MERCY OR SACRIFICE

**“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice’. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13).**

On at least two different occasions Jesus asked his critics to “go and learn” what God said about mercy and sacrifice. The first time was when Jesus ate with publicans and sinners (Matt. 9:9 - 13). The second time was when Jesus and His disciples ate grain on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1 - 8).

It seems that the motivation for mercy is the exact opposite of the motive for sacrifice. Take, for example, the sacrificing of the Passover Lamb (Ex. 12:1 - 13). The focus of this sacrifice was personal. The head of each household sacrificed the lamb for his own household. If his household was too small to eat the entire lamb, then his nearest neighbor was included. The focus, however, remained personal. The Passover Lamb was not sacrificed for someone else, but for each man’s own household.

The focus of mercy is exactly the opposite. Those who extend mercy forget themselves and focus on others. Jesus illustrated this in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 25 - 37). When the priest and the Levite saw a man in need they focused on themselves and “passed by on the other side”. As representatives of the sacrificial system their focus was on their own purity. By touching this stranger they might become unclean. They were obviously more concerned about themselves than about this poor man who had been attacked by robbers. The Samaritan, by contrast, was more concerned about the injured man than he was about himself. That’s what mercy is all about!

It is significant that the passage quoted by Jesus comes from the book of Hosea (Hosea 6:6). The prophet Hosea was commanded by God to marry an adulterous woman who would bear children as a result of her unfaithfulness (Hosea 1:2). This marriage was obviously not for his own personal satisfaction and pleasure. Hosea married her for her own good, not his! How beautiful! How profound!

This, of course, mirrors the love Jesus had for His Bride, the church. Jesus entered into a marriage with us for the same reason that Hosea married his adulterous wife.

But wait! The Bible is filled with commandments to make sacrifices. Every time someone sinned they were to make a sacrifice. Why then did God say that He desired mercy and not sacrifice?

The answer is quite simple. The sacrifice was not an end in itself, it was a means to an end. When a loving parent “commands” a wayward child to “stand in the corner” the goal of the command is not standing in the corner. The goal of the command is to teach the wayward child to behave. Similarly, the goal of God’s commands is love from a pure heart, a pure conscience, and a sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5). The goal of God’s commands is not to shed blood, but produce love.

The desire of God for mercy is not a peripheral issue but is at the heart and core of the Law and the Prophets. Consider Micah 6:6 - 8, for example. Micah reasoned that if killing one ram made God happy, why not kill a thousand and really make him happy. Ridiculous! What God really wanted was for men to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Isaiah echoed the same message. He said that God had no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats because the people making those sacrifices didn’t care for the oppressed, the fatherless and the widows (Is. 1:10 - 17). He later insisted the pure religion involves far more than merely bowing your head like a bulrush and lying on sack cloth and ashes. God’s commands were designed to make us love one another (Is. 58:1 - 7).

Someone has quipped “no roots, no fruit”. A seed produces no fruit without a root system that makes it possible. Neither can we. That’s why we need to go and learn the difference between mercy and sacrifice.