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## **Good, Acceptable, and Perfect**

I take as my text today  
the first few verses of our passage  
from Paul's Letter to the Romans.

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

These verses have always spoken strongly to me,  
but in different ways at different times in my life.

You see,

I've always had a desire  
to go big or go home  
in the spiritual life.

I've always wanted to throw myself into the deep-end  
of life with God

in the hopes that big, fireworks-y transformation might be the result.

And, while seemingly quite noble on a surface level,  
at my most honest,

I know that this desire to make myself a living sacrifice  
comes from both holy and less-than-holy places in my psyche.

Of course,

there is certainly something beautiful about wanting to give everything,  
about wanting to make a free offering of one's whole life,  
about wanting to empty oneself of selfishness.

So I certainly used to think this passage  
validated my impulse to go whole hog,

to go for broke,  
to give myself away.

Yet I also remember that back during my years  
of intensive Buddhist practice,  
I had a teacher who told me:  
you've gotta HAVE an ego before you can dismantle it, Sean...  
...you've gotta HAVE an ego before you can dismantle it.

And even though one of the goals of Buddhist practice  
is release from the insatiable demands of the ego,  
I was STILL a little bit offended.  
Who are YOU to say that I have an under-developed ego?

Had this teacher been a pastor,  
she might've said something like:  
you've gotta have a self before you can give it away.  
And I think that would've offended me just as much.  
Because I knew it was true.  
And hard truth, at that.

Now, I can hear some of your minds filling with rejoinders.  
Of course I have a self!  
I'm kicking butt and taking names all over the place,  
so I'm pretty sure my selfhood is in good shape,  
thank-you-very-much.

Yet even those of us who are slaying at life  
can still struggle with the full development of our selfhood.  
Selfhood can have difficulty coalescing for any number of reasons:  
challenges in our upbringings, our relationships, and our environments,  
to name just a few.

And so, that which we take to be the self,  
is often little more than our habitual patterns of response

to how other people treat us...to what we think the world expects of us.  
We can end up so deeply concerned by what others think,  
that we allow our selfhood to be determined by committee.

And when selfhood is so highly susceptible to outside influence,  
when one has so little in the way of stable, durable identity,  
the idea of “giving oneself away,”  
can seem really liberating.

And yet,  
the desire to make oneself a living sacrifice can also,  
just as easily,  
be a way of refusing to take responsibility  
for the development of the self.  
It can be a way of trying to shortcut one’s way to freedom  
by avoiding some of the deepest complexities of personal development.

And this approach really just doesn’t work very well.  
Because if you see yourself as nothing-much to begin with,  
there’s really not much available for you to sacrifice.  
You’re trying to give away something you don’t even have...  
...playing a game of endlessly diminishing returns.

So, as far as I can tell, this passage isn’t really suggesting  
that we turn our under-developed lives over to God,  
heroically sacrificing selves we haven’t got to give.  
This passage isn’t absolving us of the hard, messy work  
of becoming whole people.

And yet, it’s so easy to interpret it this way,  
and so seductive.  
Sometimes we yearn for a Godly form of escapism.  
For way out of the challenging process  
of trying to become more fully human.

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When I read this passage more carefully, then,  
I see that Paul is NOT really urging us to give **up** our lives.  
Rather,  
Paul is urging us to **devote** the entirety of our lives –  
our bodies,  
our minds,  
and our entire hearts –  
to God.  
To devote them.

This, then, begs the question, of course:  
why does God want so much from us?  
Why can't God understand that we're really busy  
and that modern life demands compartmentalization,  
and that we can rarely really give our best or our all?

We certainly do perceive ourselves as having limited resources,  
don't we?  
Limited time, limited energy, limited love and compassion.  
And we have to decide where to spend each of these things,  
how to parcel them out.  
Seminars on creating work-life balance abound.  
And yet we're simultaneously bombarded with demands  
from all directions:  
we're supposed to work harder,  
while also carving out more family time,  
and still saving room for me-time.

How can we possibly fit everything in?  
And how is it possible to save any room for God,  
when all-is-said-and-done?

Paul, of course, has an answer.....

Just give it all to God.  
All of it; everything.  
Body, mind, and heart.  
Hold nothing back.  
Give it to God.

Now, at first, this might sound a bit totalitarian,  
a bit oppressive.

Nobody gets **everything** from me!  
Yet, I think Paul's prescription might actually  
assist us in discovering  
what living fully really looks like.

For, in order to offer one's body,  
mustn't one already be living in a fully embodied way?  
And in order to relinquish conformity to the world,  
mustn't one already be fully engaging in the life of the world?

To consider giving everything to God,  
we have to look at what ALL means for us.  
We have to at least temporarily remove  
the compartmentalization that rules our lives  
and investigate how fully we are actually living.  
How much **do** we really have to offer?  
What is the sum total of the lives we are living at this moment?

And this is hard and humbling to do.  
Because for many of us,  
it all amounts to less than we'd like.  
Our ALL doesn't fully satisfy or impress us.  
We feel like we don't really measure up.  
We don't feel quite good enough.  
[...] We'd rather keep on

relentlessly compartmentalizing life,  
in order to avoid facing the paucity of the whole kit-and-kaboodle.

And yet, when we gather up all the fragmented bits of our lives  
and give them over to God,  
something very interesting can happen.

We presume, of course, that if we devote everything to God,  
we will run out of important things that we need.  
There just won't be enough.

We see God as just one more demand on our time and energy.  
One more consumer of our limited resources.  
God becomes an existential irritant,  
always wanting more.

But what if it's not really like this at all?

What if, no matter how paltry our self-offering might be,  
God ends up making something more of it,  
making something more of **us**.

You see...no matter how incomplete our ALL seems to be,  
God always and everywhere experiences us as beloved  
and as enough.

And when we truly come to experience ourselves as beloved,  
as enough,  
we suddenly discover that we can become even more,  
do even more,  
give even more.

Not in an effortful way,  
but in grateful and amazed response  
to seeing clearly the wholeness and goodness that is already ours.

The living sacrifice to which we're called, then,  
is the sacrifice of seeing ourselves whole...

the sacrifice of taking ourselves **all** in,  
and then giving it ALL to God.  
God who is all-in-all,  
alpha and omega,  
the beginning and end of all of our stories.

God holds all that we are and calls it GOOD,  
so that we can go into the world and call others good,  
not looking for insufficiency,  
but looking always for wholeness.  
Renewed minds see wholeness everywhere.  
Renewed minds see not in part,  
but in whole....  
through the clear lenses of belovedness.

Be not conformed, then, to a world that tells you  
that you are insufficient.  
Be conformed to a God who tells you  
that you are infinite....you are everything.

Give everything to God  
so that God can give you back to yourself –  
the same and yet different –  
the luster of infinity shining just a little bit brighter.

God has made you good, and acceptable, and perfect.

So go forth in trust.  
Help the world give itself to God.  
For in receiving itself back yet again,  
the world might just glimpse its true beauty afresh.  
And beauty, begets beauty, begets beauty.

Sometimes...

...sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.

It can make all the difference.

Amen.