Teaching Sacrifice

"Johnny, give your toy to your sister. You need to learn to share."

"No, Annie, I don’t feel like taking you to the party tonight. It’s time you learn to give up your own desires once in a while."

“We shouldn’t complain when our high taxes go to support the homeless. The Bible says we should sacrifice to help others."

All three of these statements have something in common. Do you know what it is?

All three have a faulty understanding of the meaning of sacrifice. The first sentence sounds pretty innocuous and I’ve often heard it said to toddlers. The second statement is a little more problematic and you may have heard parents of teenagers say this. The third statement shows the full picture of misunderstanding biblical sacrifice.

There is a great deal of confusion in our culture today concerning what sacrifice is for and why we should do it. Sacrifice is the giving up of something valuable – time, money, possessions, and so on. Most people agree that sacrifice is a good thing. But how do we teach biblical sacrifice? And why should we bother teaching it in the first place? The answer to this is crucial and goes back to the sample remarks I included at the beginning of the article.

A true understanding of sacrifice colors our views of how we interact with everyone, on every level. It not only affects how a toddler treats his sister, it not only changes how a teenager treats her family, it also affects how we view business and how we view government. If sacrifice is merely a “good thing to do” and the only reward is just feeling good about ourselves, then capitalism is wrong and socialism is right. Socialism says that we should feel good about being forced to give up our time, money and possessions for others with no purpose or gain for ourselves. The common good is all, personal gain is naught. Is this biblical?

The first recorded sacrifice in the Bible was Cain and Abel’s sacrifices to God. Genesis 4 indicates that Abel gave up the best of his flocks, while Cain only gave some of the fruits of his gardens. God was displeased with Cain’s sacrifice and said, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:7)

Sacrifice Is Costly

There are at least two principles we can learn from this story. The first principle is that a sacrifice that costs us nothing is not truly a sacrifice, regardless of the value of what we’ve given up. Giving someone a pile of lovely clothes, for instance, is a nice thing to do. But if we couldn’t wear or sell the clothes anyway, it’s not a sacrifice for us. This has implications for our Christian walk. Saying, “Oh, I’m sacrificing time with my family to work at a church ministry,” may be true. On the other hand, if we wanted to go have a good time with the folks at church and just get away from the
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It is very easy for we Christians to decide what we want to do (regardless of God’s will) and then say we’re “sacrificing” in order to do it. This sounds very spiritual and may convince those around us that we’re very giving people. But God is not fooled.

When we teach sacrifice to our children, the first principle we must teach is that it is costly. For example, it is not just throwing a worn-out toy to your sister - it may be letting her play with your favorite choo-choo train. It is not just giving up a party to go hang out in front of the TV – it may be instead spending the time helping your family on a project. True sacrifice is from the heart and it is an unselfish desire to honestly give something up for God or for others. I Corinthians 13:3 says, “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Sacrifice Is Gainful

The second principle we can learn from Cain’s situation is that sacrifice is for a purpose. We can expect to gain something for our sacrifice. I’ll admit this idea seemed rather odd to me at first, until I started doing scriptural research on it. After all, a sacrifice is giving up something, right? Why would you expect to get something out of it? Isn’t that selfish?

But consider with me the various scriptures concerning sacrifice, starting with Cain. God tells him that if his sacrifice is right, he will be accepted. The gain of his sacrifice is fellowship with God. The Apostle Paul tells us that giving our bodies as living sacrifices to God will gain for us the ability to discern God’s will. Jesus Himself taught in Mark 8:34-35, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” Here we see that the ultimate sacrifice we can make – giving up our lives to Christ – is for the purpose of gaining our lives back in eternal salvation. Even Jesus’ sacrifice of His life on the cross was for gain – the salvation of His people. True sacrifice is not pointless. It is for a purpose and the sacrificial person should hope to gain something good in the end.

Thus, we should not only teach our children to sacrifice, but also teach them why to sacrifice. For instance, in my earlier examples, giving up toys or parties can be used to help your child build a stronger relationship with his family. Sacrificing some time on the computer to help mom clean the kitchen can make for a happier mom and allow supper to be served in a timely fashion to the whole family. Sacrificing some money from an allowance can help orphans in Haiti.

In other words, asking your children to sacrifice things should not be arbitrary and pointless. Giving up their desires all the time in order to make life more convenient for you doesn’t teach godly sacrifice – it teaches resentment of authority. Parents should not only ask for meaningful godly sacrifice for their children, they should help model it as well. From the time I was a small child, I always wanted to give a tithe of my little allowance on Sunday because I saw Mom and Dad
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cheerfully doing so as well. In my younger years, the gain from my sacrifice was Mom and Dad’s loving approval. As I grew old enough to understand God’s requirements of His people, the gain from my sacrifice became His approval and blessing as well. Children should be taught that there is a clear purpose and gain in the sacrifice being asked of them.

Sacrifice Is Not

For Pigs

Lastly, there is a final aspect of sacrifice that we must teach our children. Matthew 7:6 is a warning not to throw our pearls before swine. Pearls are valuable and giving them up is a sacrifice. But God tells us not to give them up for pigs – animals who neither understand, appreciate nor benefit from what you’ve sacrificed.

I have seen many Christians with a mistaken understanding of this aspect of sacrifice. They blindly continue to give money they can’t afford to people who are bilking them through false hard-luck stories. They sacrifice time away from their family to help someone who refuses to repent of sin and sucks them dry of energy. These people frequently cater to their children’s every desire, sacrificing great amounts of time and money to do so, while their children remain selfish and unappreciative.

Remember that sacrifice is for a purpose and there should be a good thing gained in the end. Sometimes God calls us to sacrifice in such a way that our only gain is a peaceful conscience. But God calls us to use discernment in giving up our time and possessions. Sacrifice for sacrifice’s sake is pointless. Let there be good attained by it.

Obviously, these principles of sacrifice have implications for business and government, as I mentioned in the beginning. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore all of them. But you can use these principles to consider some basic questions with your children.

Is it wrong for a businessman to expect monetary gain from sacrificing his time and materials to make a good product?

Is it wrong for a taxpayer to want to see lifestyle improvement in the poor people his money is used to help?

God has created the world to run on certain principles – the law of gravity is one example. I would suggest that another example is the law of sacrifice for ultimate gain. We give up something we value in order to cause something even more valuable to happen. This happens when a farmer sacrifices his time and energy to till the land. This happens when a businessman sacrifices his effort and investment to create a saleable product. This happens when a mother sacrifices the family salary in exchange for groceries.
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And it also happens when a girl sacrifices the time to make her sister’s bed. It happens when a boy sacrifices the time to mow the lawn for his dad. And it happens when Mom and Dad sacrifice time and money to bring pleasure to their children. And the ultimate sacrifice was God giving His Son to save us from our sins. Let us teach our children to use love, discernment and wisdom in practicing Biblical sacrifice.

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