

## On Choosing the Chocolate Chip Cookies Without the Chips

Matthew 9:9-13 and 12:1-8

(Jesus explains to those who are frustrated with his not following the restrictions of the religious law that he desires mercy, not sacrifice.)

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If I were to say to you, “I am so glad you are all here today. I’m going to *reward* you for coming to church by giving you a sermon that is twice as long,” would you feel rewarded? I guess if I want to reward you for coming to worship, I need to reconsider whether the reward I offer is one you really want. A reward only works if it is something that *encourages desired* behavior.

Strangely enough, we seldom check to see whether the rewards and punishments that we use regularly actually alter behavior in the direction we want. In fact, it’s sort of crazy how often we are glued to our chosen punishments and rewards, even when they are obviously not working.

The same thing occurs with *sacrifice*.

This is the first Sunday of Lent, and we often associate Lent with making some sort of sacrifice. It makes sense to see whether a sacrifice that we’re engaging in or considering actually achieves its purpose. Meaningful *sacrifices are important for us to consider making. However, we often make sacrifices that are pointless or even counter to spiritual growth.*

I have come to a tentative conclusion that there are *two reasons* to sacrifice. One reason is to do something (or to refrain from doing something) out of compassion, that is, to make things better, usually for others.

One huge sacrifice that is going on right now, during these years of war, is that of soldiers and their families. In addition to the overwhelming sacrifice of ones life, these military families are making so many other kinds of sacrifices. Hundreds of thousands of people are sacrificing, hoping to make things better for countries and the people in them.

Consider other sacrifices. A friend of mine decided to be a vegetarian. Although she knew various reasons people choose to be vegetarian, the one that persuaded her was that eating low on the food chain uses less energy, so more people can be fed with the same amount of energy. As she “sacrifices” eating beef or pork and eats instead, beans, vegetables and grains, the middle step of the food chain is skipped, and much less energy is required to keep her nourished. Something strange happened as she made this “sacrifice.” She found her new eating habits to be quite healthy and truly enjoyable!

You may sacrifice your leisure time to tutor at the Mustard Seed tutoring program in Redlands, or to tutor children here at church, or a niece or nephew, then, lo and behold, you fall in love with the children and look forward to those tutoring hours as if they were *your* reward!

If we manage to sacrifice (to change our behavior) out of genuine compassion—and things *are actually better for others or ourselves*, then it’s not unusual that our new behavior at some point no longer *seems* sacrificial—we enjoy our new choices. If that happens, it’s a great result. You decide if it’s still a sacrifice.

The first reason to sacrifice is *to make things better, to act out of compassion.*

Sometimes we *sacrifice* for our own benefit—healthy diets fit into this category. We don't eat something that we like; we sacrifice it, but we gain in health, so we benefit—whether or not we “enjoy” it.

Our daughter now bakes her own chocolate chip cookies. That way she gets to eat as much dough as she wants while she makes them. However, when she was in college, I used to send her cookies every couple months or so. I discovered that her roommate Kristin didn't like chocolate—but does like the cookies *without* the chips. When the two of them were rooming together, along with a third student, in Rome, Italy, for a semester abroad, I sent the three of them cookies across the Atlantic Ocean. I left some without chocolate chips, for Kristin. Alexandra put the cookies on a plate on the living room table, making them available for anyone. The third roommate saw them and was pleased, and I guess, hungry, so he took a couple, since he rightly assumed they were on the table for anyone. However, he didn't want to be greedy or to take the BEST cookies, so he made a *sacrifice*; he took the ones that he thought just happened to have *no chocolate chips*.

Once in a while we sacrifice, then discover that what we thought was being compassionate is in fact not.<sup>1</sup> Alexandra's roommate in Rome thought he was being compassionate, but he ate the cookies intended for Kristin! He made two assumptions. He assumed that the girls would like chocolate chips. And, he assumed that it was good in and of itself to sacrifice. He knew what he liked, but he chose what he liked less, being sacrificial. *He assumed he couldn't have what he liked AND the girls also have what they liked.*

This was a very tiny matter—a laughing matter. But, some of us do this on a regular basis, or we do this on big matters. We may assume that it is *better for someone* if we sacrifice our vocation to care for our children, or in the opposite direction, we may assume that it is *better for someone* if we sacrifice caring for our children to follow our vocation. We assume that it is compassionate to spend time with someone, even if that makes us exhausted and they are not any happier. *It may be compassionate. But, it may not be.* When we decide to make a sacrifice, it is very wise on our part to be rather sure that our sacrifice *really is an act of compassion*, that it actually does make things better for someone. Sacrifice in itself has no particular worth. We're not a “better” person or “better” Christian just because we sacrifice.

Jesus died; that was an incredible sacrifice. He died because he would not deny his belief in God and his conviction that he was speaking for God on behalf of all people, especially the oppressed. He *sacrificed his life* out of compassion, for a greater good. *And, unquestionably, immense good has come forth from Jesus' sacrifice.*

It is conceivable that God wanted a different outcome—wanted a solution that did not require Jesus' death. I do not believe that God set out to sacrifice Jesus or that Jesus' sacrifice was somehow essential for the universe. But when it came to the situation of choice, Jesus sacrificed his life out of compassion. And, through his death and the resurrection enormous love and good has emerged.

Yet, *Jesus* himself never *glorified* sacrifice. Christianity has at times fostered in some followers a morbid acceptance of sacrifice. Sometimes Christians believe that even the sufferings they have not chosen are somehow sacrificial or God-ordained. A too-large percentage of those who go to domestic violence shelters enter quoting Christian hymns

and misquoting Scriptures, thinking that as Christians they were supposed to endure abuse. *Jesus did not glorify sacrifice. Jesus glorified compassion.* Out of compassion, sacrifice may be called for at times—but then sacrifice that is done out of compassion must actually make things better for someone.

We read from the Gospel of Matthew two interesting passages: In one instance Jesus is challenged as to why he and his disciples eat with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus responds, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” The other passage reveals a scene in which Jesus and his disciples are gleaning in the fields, that is, eating grain that is left-over in other people's fields. This was quite okay to do, if they were poor and if it were not the Sabbath, but it was the Sabbath. One commentator points out that the disciples were not having a snack—they were genuinely poor and hungry. Jesus argues that the disciples *can* legitimately eat these grains on the Sabbath. Again, Jesus says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

Twice Jesus has said this: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

Jesus is quoting the Bible, the *Hebrew Bible!* He is citing the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE old tiny prophetic book of *Hosea* (6:6) “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice. . .” Prophet Hosea was criticizing his culture’s religious practices that sometimes put sacrifice above compassion.

So, according to Jesus’ teaching this is the order of things: The Sabbath is important, but Sacrifice may be more important than the Sabbath and Mercy or Compassion is even more important.

Compassion is the most important, that’s the bottom line.

I said there were two reasons to sacrifice. One is to make things better for someone, compassion. The second reason we might choose to make a sacrifice is to *focus*, to stay focused on a particular prayer concern or to keep attention on God. When people refrain from drinking soft drinks, alcohol, eating chocolate, spinach, whatever, during Lent, one major intended purpose is to *focus—on God*. When we reach for chocolate, we remember, “Uh, oh, no,” then we remember God.

It’s possible to sacrifice in order to *focus other peoples’ attention* on an urgent concern. When our youth fasted for 30 hours recently, their *purpose* was to stay *focused on God* and to focus attention upon humans who do not have enough food.

Mahatma Gandhi used sacrifice to help a whole nation to focus.<sup>2</sup> Gandhi sacrificed by fasting numerous times in order to get the population of India to treat the “Untouchables,” the lowest caste, as human beings. One of India’s leaders, Nehru, said of Gandhi: “[H]e conquers his opponents by his love and sacrifice”<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi’s sacrifices were not chosen whimsically. He spent weeks, months, deciding the most effective sacrifice and timing in order to get masses of people *to focus on an injustice and to work for a solution*. Plus, he didn’t hesitate to admit when he had made a mistake; Gandhi would reverse his course, realizing that a particular sacrifice or action was not effective.<sup>4</sup>

It’s good to ask ourselves today whether a sacrifice we might make would help someone or help us to focus our attention upon God or a prayer concern. But it’s equally wise to notice any sacrifice we might be making that isn’t achieving any good purpose whatsoever. Don’t assume you have to take the cookie without the chips; it may serve no purpose or actually be taking what someone else wants.

*Jesus insisted that God wants compassion, not sacrifice.*

As a role model for reconsidering our rewards and sacrifices, I have reconsidered how to reward you for being here today—with the help of the Worship Committee, you'll find along with the coffee this morning chocolate chip cookies, with and without chips.

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<sup>1</sup> I go visit Aunt Susie and take her a meal every Thursday, then discover that she is being polite; she doesn't like my meals and she's actually frustrated that I come during her favorite TV program. Aunt Susie feels like she is *sacrificing* to let me bring meals on Thursdays—all the while I'm feeling like I am the one who is *sacrificing*!

<sup>2</sup> He taught his self-sacrificing yogic spirit to relish the "delicious taste" of fasting, taking pleasure in every pain he suffered for the "common good."

Soon after launching his monumental Satyagraha ("Hold fast to the Truth") movement in South Africa, Gandhi resolved, as he wrote in 1906, that "sacrifice" was the "law of life."

<sup>3</sup> Wolpert, Stanley. *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Oxford University Press, 2001, 169.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

"The purer the suffering (tapas)," Gandhi believed, "the greater the progress....Hence did the sacrifice of Jesus suffice to free a sorrowful world...If .... *Ibid.*, 6.