

SACRIFICIAL SERVICE

Romans 12:1

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This weekend we are celebrating Memorial Day. For many people this holiday marks the beginning of summer. It's an opportunity to start vacationing or gather with family and friends for an outdoor barbecue. This holiday, however, has a much more hallowed meaning, one which can be easily forgotten. It is a time for us to remember and honor those who have died while serving in the Armed Forces of our nation.

This holiday has its origins in the aftermath of the Civil War. In both the South and the North, families and sometimes entire communities gathered together to honor their fallen. Then in 1868, John Logan, General of the Grand Army of the Republic, a veterans' organization for those who had served in the Union Army, suggested the establishment of a "Decoration Day." The idea was enthusiastically received and ceremonies began to take place throughout the nation, especially in the North. Gradually the name of this special remembrance became known as Memorial Day. My mother recalled that when she was a little girl, she and her classmates would be dismissed from school to go to a Civil War cemetery in Philadelphia on Memorial Day. They would place little American flags on the gravesites of the fallen and then wait as veterans of that conflict, now old men dressed in their faded uniforms, came marching down the aisle between the tomb stones.

Today, that ceremony will be repeated in numerous places throughout our nation, the most solemn of which will take place at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the Arlington National Cemetery. Journey with me to this hallowed spot and read again the inscription on the tomb. It declares, "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." Completed and opened to the public in 1932, it contains the remains of an unknown soldier who died during the First World War. That soldier symbolizes all of those unknown dead who have sacrificed their lives in defense of our nation.

However, this morning I want us to focus our attention upon those who stand guard over this tomb, members of the 3rd U. S. Infantry Regiment known as the "Old Guard." Since 1937 they have taken upon themselves the responsibility of honoring and protecting this sacred monument with their very presence, 24 hours a day, in all kinds of weather. Even during hurricanes and snowstorms they have faithfully maintained their vigil. When I consider their dedication to the one who is being honored within that mausoleum, I am reminded of what Saint Paul said to his young protégé, Timothy, so long ago, "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3). For we too are guardians, guardians not of a tomb of dead men's bones, but guardians on an empty tomb and the One who was resurrected from its cold confines, the Lord Jesus Christ. Like the soldiers of the "Old Guard" at Arlington National Cemetery, we too have a duty to perform, a sacrificial duty that has been clearly delineated for us in the book of Romans, chapter 12, verse 1. It reads, "I

beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service.”

If we like Timothy, are soldiers in the army of God and if we like the “Old Guard” have been called upon to bring honor and recognition to the One whom we serve, what are our duties and responsibilities? They are described throughout the pages of the New Testament, but nowhere are they more clearly defined than in this singular verse of Scripture. Let us examine it carefully this morning in light of the example that has been given unto us by those who guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Like them, we too must render sacrificial service. Sacrificial service means complete and absolute devotion, no matter the cost. But how, you might ask should this service be rendered? There are four distinct ways that you and I are called upon to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here’s the first one. We are expected to be **physical sacrifices**. The soldiers who guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier are well aware of this kind of devotion. They march back and forth across the front of the tomb 24 hours a day in all kinds of weather. It doesn’t matter if it is raining or snowing. Their physical presence is a demonstration of their devotion. In fact, it adds an air of solemnity that would otherwise be absent if they were not present. Like these soldiers, we too should be the kind of Christians that are present and accounted for with regards to the affairs of God’s kingdom. The world needs to see us when we are called upon to worship the Lord as well as when we are about His business out in the world. Our very presence is a testimony of our devotion. I’ll always remember the example set by my father. He was a stroke patient, the left side of his body almost completely paralyzed. It was hard for him to get around. It would have been easy for him to just stay at home. Nevertheless, on any given Sunday you would find him dressed and present at the morning worship services of our church. You could actually say that it was a physical sacrifice for him just to be there. That is why I grieve in my heart when so many Christians pursue their own interests with little or no regard for the things of the Lord. They are essentially AWOL. They have forgotten that when they joined up for the Kingdom of God, it involved the totality of who they are, including their physical presence. Writing to the Christians in Corinth, Paul said, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:9). Being a Christian is more than mental assent to beliefs and doctrines. It is the offering of your life, everything that you are to God.

Second, we are to be **living sacrifices**. If you have ever visited Washington D. C., you have probably seen numerous statues, especially at the memorials honoring those who have served in wars which our nation has fought. None of those statues, however, no matter how majestic, were alive. Those who guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier are not immovable statues. They are living breathing soldiers constantly on the move. They march a precise 21 steps, in recognition of a 21 gun salute, the highest military honor that can be bestowed. Then they about face and repeat the process all over again. Likewise, we as God’s people need to be active in the work of the Kingdom. We need to be doing those things which honor the Lord. Your

active involvement in the ministries of this church and those which this congregation supports in the Bedford community are important. Of course, I recognize that there are times in our lives, especially as we grow older that our involvement is restricted. However, throughout my ministry I've been amazed to discover how God's people find ways to still be a living sacrifice even though they are restricted by age or illness. One example that I remember was a homebound member who had a card writing ministry. She could not leave her home. Nevertheless, she reached out to her fellow members and friends through the beautiful cards that she wrote and mailed to them. Writing to fellow believers, Peter wrote long ago, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). We are not the frozen chosen. We are living breathing servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Third, we are to be **holy sacrifices**. Those who serve as soldiers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier must be spotless in their deportment. It involves not only the care with which they dress and prepare themselves for service. It also involves the very way in which they live. For example, each soldier must be in superb physical condition and possess an unblemished military record. There are specific standards of behavior which they must follow both on and off duty. In fact, their regimental motto is "my standard is perfection." In other words they are to be distinctly different, set apart from the usual, holy in their sacrificial service. We have already heard that word, "holy," in every verse of Scripture that has been used this morning. But what does it mean? Paul explains it in this way, he says, "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13). In dress, in speech, in lifestyle our lives need to be exemplary. Our lives need to uphold a standard of behavior which far surpasses what we see in the world around us. I'm sure that everyone has heard of the horrific events which transpired at the school in Texas on Tuesday. That was the epitome of wickedness. It reflected the abandonment of the basic moral values which we are to uphold as Christians. It was a rejection of the sixth commandment of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shall not kill. Thou shall not commit murder." Now more than ever, we must become the standard bearers of a way of life that embraces righteousness, goodness and love. Otherwise our nation will be consumed by an evilness from which we will not escape.

Finally, we must become **pleasing sacrifices**. The typical tour of duty for a soldier who guards the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is one year in length. At the end of that year if the soldier has performed their duties flawlessly, he or she receives the "Tomb Guard Identification Badge," which is to be worn on the right pocket of their uniform jacket. It is not simply given out to everyone who has served, but is reserved for a select few. During all of the years that soldiers have been standing guard at the Tomb, only about 600 badges have been issued, I suspect a number far fewer than the sum total of all of those who have served. I cannot help but be reminded of what Jesus said about those who serve the Lord in an exemplary manner. Remember the parable of the talents in the Gospel of Matthew. What does the master say to those who have invested his funds wisely? He declares, "Well done, good and faithful

servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matthew 25:21)! Isn't that what we want to hear when we step before the Lord in heaven. Therefore, let us take to heart what the writer of the book of Hebrews said so long ago, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16).

Like the soldiers who stand guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, we too stand guard at a tomb. It is not, however, a tomb that contains the remains of one who is unknown. It is rather the tomb of One who is known, but who is no longer there. It is the tomb of the resurrected Christ. Like the women who returned from that tomb telling everyone what they had seen and heard, let us likewise go forth and tell all the world that we serve a living Savior, that He is in our world today, bringing hope and deliverance to all who call upon Him.