

“The Difference Between a Sacrifice and a Privilege”

Mark 8:34-38

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

Smoke Rise Baptist Church

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Communion Devotion

When a sacrifice becomes a privilege, it takes on a spiritual dimension that energizes us and leads to immeasurable joy. This was revealed to me again last week while on a mission trip to New York with nineteen other Smoke Rise members.

All of us make sacrifices, however, many are imposed on us. We don't choose them and reluctantly accept them. Who wants to give up sweets to lose weight, fried foods to lower cholesterol, elevators for stairs to strengthen our heart or weekends to take care of elderly parents? As good as these things are, they still drain us physically and emotionally.

When we see a sacrifice as an opportunity to make the world better or improve our life or someone else's, it changes our attitude and the sacrifice becomes a privilege that takes on a spiritual dimension. It energizes us and brings us unspeakable joy. I believe this happened to the twenty members of our church that went on a mission trip last week to New York City to work with inner-city kids. I hope it happened to you, too, here in Atlanta or wherever you were.

Our volunteers made a lot of sacrifices last week while in New York. To say the least, the **living conditions** were less than desirable. No one would voluntarily live like we did. On this trip, all the men lived in a closet. Oh, it was not really a closet but it was less than two hundred square feet, 193 to be exact. Now, you do the math. That's 19.3 square feet per person and to get to this room, you had to climb eighty-three steps. Speaking of steps, each time the men needed to go to the bathroom, they had to go to the floor below, which meant climbing up and down more steps.

Now, the men decided the women were catered to and pampered by the powers that be at the Metro Baptist Church because each of them had twenty-seven square feet of living and working space in their room. Besides, their bathroom was on the same floor as their bedroom, which qualified as a luxury to the men. I think the pictures will support our bias.

The **working conditions** of our volunteers were also challenging. We divided into two groups because the schools were held in different locations, one in Hell's Kitchen and the other in Brooklyn. Both groups interacted with approximately thirty-five to forty elementary age children for six hours a day using a day camp or Vacation Bible School format. Each group led Bible studies, history lessons, worked on crafts, led in worship, served refreshments and played on the playground with the children.

The Brooklyn group did so in a storefront church that was tiny. This meant that the day camp was conducted at a park three blocks from the storefront church. As a result, this group had to move tables, tents, refreshments and supplies to the park each day. Did I mention that all of this was done after riding the subway for almost an hour to get to the church?

While the day camps were being conducted, Wilson Echols and David Champa installed a baptistry in the Metro Baptist Church. What made their task so challenging

was that one of the day camps was conducted in the same room they worked. How many carpenters, plumbers and electricians do you know that could concentrate and work while being surrounded by forty very active children? I'm drawing a blank.

As the week progressed, though, something amazing happened. Sacrifices became privileges that did not drain these members but energized them.

What happened? What made the difference? Jesus came and enabled each volunteer missionary to focus upon the children, not the hardships. He helped everyone to see beyond the crowded accommodations to the smile on the children's faces and the glow in their eyes. He helped each leader feel the children's excitement not their own exhaustion. Jesus helped everyone understand that this is the Gospel in its purest form. For you see, the Gospel is first and foremost incarnational-God with us in the flesh walking in our shoes, living in our world, knowing our names, facing our temptations and challenges, enduring our hardships, crying our tears, listening to our problems, sharing our disappointments, feeling our pain and healing our wounds. This is the Gospel. Anything other than this is not. I'm not sure what it is, but it is not the Gospel.

Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel will save it"** Mark 8:34-35. I understand "cross" to be voluntary. We choose it because it will make the world better and when we do, it is no longer a sacrifice but a privilege that does not depress us but brings us joy, great joy.

Jesus also said in reference to helping the poor, **"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me"** Matthew 25:40. I believe this indicates the dividing line between sacrifices and privileges. Sacrifices become privileges the moment we see beyond the immediate into the future, beyond the physical into the spiritual, beyond ourselves and into the Kingdom. Sacrifices take on new meaning and purpose when we do this. So does life.

I think I know twenty people that could tell you about this. I hope you could tell us, too, from your experiences last week to enter people's joy and sorrow. Think about this as we take communion and remember the one that died to save us from our sins and would tell us today that **it was a privilege, not a sacrifice.**