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A No-Win Situation

Romans 6:11-23

The 21st century has witnessed an upsurge in religious fervor across the world. There also has been an upsurge of critics who see the dark side of religion. In his book, **When Religion Becomes Evil**, Religion Professor Charles Kimball writes (p. 1): *“It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.”* If you think Dr. Kimball is placing blame on Islam, you would be wrong for his field of expertise is the Middle East and Muslim-Christian relations. Rather, his claim is a judgment in reflecting upon religious history. Catholic theologian Dr. William Cavanaugh offers a different perspective. In a lecture entitled, *“Does Religion Cause Violence”*, he takes issue with critics who make sweeping generalizations about religion as the primary source for violence. He argues that religion can never be isolated from the culture and other influences which shape people’s values.

In the U.S., violence is newsworthy. People are drawn to disturbing news reports of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers who have been arrested for alleged child abuse toward young children, particularly resulting in the child’s death. In recent weeks, national news has focused on the murder trial of Casey Anthony accused of killing her two year-old daughter, Caylee. In local news, Mason Weems was arrested in Springfield for the alleged murder of his girlfriend’s two-year-old son, Anakin Credit. We cannot comprehend such horrific acts toward children. Yet, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that 80% of abused children come from the hands of parents. In 2007, it resulted in 1,760 deaths with 75% being children under 4 years old.

Given the alarming rise of death of abused children world-wide, the story of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Issac is horrifying! It appears to justify Dr. Kimball’s assertion that history is littered with people murdered for religious reasons. How could we possibly reconcile the view of Abraham as a person of faith who committed infanticide?

In Romans 6:11, Paul writes: *“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?”* The apostle Paul says that living as a Christian involves choosing whether to live one’s life ruled by sinful desires or to live one’s life in obedience to God. Paul declares that our decision is a choice between death and righteousness.

Soren Kierkegaard in his classic work, **Fear and Trembling**, examines this dramatic story of Abraham and Issac. He claims that Abraham did not have a choice between death and righteousness. Instead, Abraham was faced with an ethical dilemma. The Genesis text (22:1a) begins by saying *“After these things God tested Abraham.”* The test is whether or not Abraham would obey God’s command (22:2): *“ . . . ‘Take your son, your only son Issac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ ”*

What things took place that led God to test Abraham? Earlier, Abraham had banished his first-born son Ishmael with his mother Hagar. She was Sarah's slave girl given to Abraham to bear a son because Sarah doubted that motherhood was possible given her age. I wonder if Abraham felt guilty about expelling Ishmael from his household that he viewed this test as a punishment from God.

Abraham finds himself in a "no-win" situation. Kierkegaard says that if Abraham obeys God's command he will be asked to violate his conscience by committing an unethical act. For Kierkegaard, God's test of Abraham is an anguishing ethical dilemma in declaring (p. 70): ". . . *the temptation is itself the ethical which would keep him from doing God's will.*" If Abraham carries out God's command, which seems unthinkable, justice would demand Abraham's arrest to be prosecuted for attempted premeditated murder of a child.

Does this passage give religious justification for child sacrifice that would indict religions as the source of violence in the world? I think the answer is found in the climax of the dramatic story (22:10): "*Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.*"

Like a Law and Order episode as police rush in a house to save a victim, an angel of the Lord intervenes and says to Abraham (22:11): "*Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.*" The intervention by the angel of the Lord affirms that the God of Abraham is not a god who would condone child sacrifice as a way to win God's favor. This was a cultural religious practice in Canaan among some people who worshiped the god Molech.

The Old Testament echoes strong prohibitions against the people of Israel imitating the surrounding culture's religious practices of child sacrifice. In Leviticus 20:3, God commands Moses to declare God's judgment for such a practice: "*I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name.*"

God intervened to restrain Abraham from raising his hand with the knife to commit a violent act of murdering his son Isaac as a human sacrifice to God. The apostle Paul viewed religion as a power to restrain the human inclination to the sin of violence. In Romans 6:13, he says: "*No longer present your members (i.e. hands, arms, feet) to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.*"

God tested Abraham to determine if he would be willing to sacrifice what he loved the most, his "*only son*" Isaac who was his only hope of progeny, to place his trust in God with unwavering devotion without expecting something in return. Like Abraham, our faith will be tested daily and we will find it difficult because God desires faithful devotion to righteous living.

The question is: What do you love so much that you are not willing to sacrifice it for God's sake? Is it to pursue the American Dream as the ultimate goal of your life instead of advancing the kingdom of God? Is it to shower all your love upon your family that results in your love for God taking a backseat? Is it your devotion to your work or pursuit of hobbies that squeezes out time to worship God, grow in faith, and serve others in the name of Jesus?

At the beginning of the Romans passage, the apostle Paul reminds the Christian community to remain focused on Christ as he says (6:11): *“so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”*

We need to look to Jesus to strengthen our faith because he made the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus sacrificed his will in obedience to God his Father, and sacrificed his life by his willingness to die on the cross to save us from the destructive power of sin. Paul concludes his appeal to the Christians in Rome by declaring a warning and hope in these words (6:23): *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*