



THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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What Will We Give To God?

By DAVID DIESTELKAMP

I NEED A GIFT for a sleeping newborn baby. DRUM SOLO!" say the memes poking fun at the "Little Drummer Boy" song. The boy didn't think he had anything to give to the newborn King, so he gave the best he had—he played his drum for Him. Though not intended to be deeply theological, "Little Drummer Boy" speaks to something we struggle with more than the challenge of not disturbing a sleeping baby: What will we give to God? Is our best good enough?

The question, "What will we give to God?" goes all the way back to the first acts of worship recorded in Scripture. Cain and Abel brought offerings to the Lord. Cain brought "an offering of the fruit of the ground" and Abel brought "of the first-born of his flock" (Gen 4:3-4). The Lord "respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering" (Gen 4:4-5). What God "respects" ("looks with favor" NIV; "regards" ESV, NASB) is what we want, right? It's the reason for worship, sacrifice, and service, right?

There have been a lot of debates about why God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's. We know that "By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commanding him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks" (Heb 11:4 ESV). Giving to God isn't about just giving whatever we have that happens to be our best. Abel's faith and sacrifice still proclaim the importance of giving to God what He respects and what He accepts.

Knowing what God respects and accepts so we can give to God in faith isn't a guessing game. Faith is based on God's word (Rom 10:17). We can't know the mind of God (what He respects and accepts) unless it is

revealed to us. The Spirit—Who searches the deep things of God—reveals the mind of God through the words of Scripture (1 Cor 2:1-16). Paul is saying that what God accepts is no longer a mystery.

Some years ago, a man who was searching for a church said he would never be part of a church that didn't use instrumental music because he wanted to give to God his gift, talent, and ability to play instruments. On the surface, giving something valuable seems admirable; but it is dangerously close to Cain and the "Little Drummer Boy." We need to ask this question—has God said that He accepts what is being given? And more to the point, what should the response be when God doesn't accept what is offered?

Cain famously responded poorly when God rejected his sacrifice. First, "Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell" (Gen 4:5). Later, his jealousy drove him to kill his brother Abel. We would never respond like this, or would we?

Do we give what God wants or what we want to give? I can think of reasons why Cain would want to give God his vegetables. He was a farmer and that's what farmers have; and it's what they produce and value. It was a sacrifice for Cain and it was given to God! But this is not all that matters. The will of God matters. Do we check to see what God wants as revealed in His word before we give to Him, worship Him, and offer Him service? Are we giving what we want, what we like, and what we value, or are we giving what God says He wants? Are we sure God will accept what we offer?

How do we respond when God doesn't accept what we offer? Do we get angry like Cain when we find out that God doesn't accept what we try to give Him? Do we assume that God wouldn't reject something because we like it or a lot of people do it? We would do well to listen to what God

said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Gen 4:6-7). Getting angry and pouting in disbelief doesn't change the will of God. If God doesn't accept what we offer, we need to change what we offer and not blame God or His messengers who show us His word.

Warning: Sin is close! When God saw that Cain responded negatively to what should have been a positive learning experience, God said, "And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" (Gen 4:7). In other words, Cain's negative response would lead to sin if he didn't control it. Anger, pride, and not acting in faith do not draw us closer to God (Ja 1:20). Humility and submission bring us to serving God as He wills, doing the things He accepts; and faith causes us to repent and change when we discover we have done something God doesn't accept. We want to know what He wants and offer to Him what He wants!

Cain did the unthinkable. Cain didn't rule over his anger and did the unthinkable. Cain murdered his brother "because his works were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 Jn 3:12). Our selfish, jealous pride can cause us to do unthinkable things. Even the desire to give to God can cause us to hurt our brothers and sisters in Christ, divide churches, and even abandon the Lord if our desire is rooted in what we want and respect rather than what God wants and respects.

So, what do we do when God doesn't accept what we give? Do we become incredulous and insulted? Let us remember that even our best isn't good enough for the God of all creation. Therefore, our primary obligation is to listen to God with faith, trust, and humility, and let Him tell us what it is that He respects and accepts.

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Giving Thought to What You Put On

By AL DIESTELKAMP

IN HIS SERMON ON THE MOUNT, Jesus identified some things about which we don't need to worry, including what we "put on" our bodies. Jesus stated that the body "is more than clothing" (Matt. 6:25). The King James Version of this text reads, "Take no thought...for your body, what ye shall put on." While Jesus was teaching reliance on God for the necessities of life, perhaps some Christians literally "take no thought" to what they put on when preparing to take part in public worship.

I am not calling for a return to a time when almost all men attended worship in suits and ties and women in dresses. That ship has sailed! However, I believe thought should be given to what we wear in *every* situation which includes engaging in public worship honoring the King of Kings. Most of us are careful to dress respectfully in other public gatherings, so why is it too much to ask that we do so when we assemble for worship?

Clothing styles in almost all situations have been trending downward from "dressy" to increasingly more casual over the past several decades. One only has to view photos of attendees at major league baseball games in the 1940's, showing men wearing suits and hats, to confirm this dramatic change. Photos from the 1950's show most stay-at-home women wearing shirtwaist dresses and high heels as they managed their homes and children. And for those of us old enough to remember, who could forget the introduction of the "leisure suit" in the 1970's? And you don't have to be that old to remember when most banks and other professional businesses required their employees to wear suits or dresses. Then "casual Friday" became popular and evolved into "casual every day."

Recognizing the cultural changes, it is no surprise that worship attire has trended in a similar direction. Many (perhaps most) celebrate the relaxed worship atmosphere that is created through more casual attire, while some of us are a little slow in embracing it. Advocates of casual attire in worship think it is good because visitors who are not "dressed up" may feel more welcome when they see members in casual attire. I can see the logic in this argument, however, if *everyone* is "casual," how out of place will visitors feel who dress in their "Sunday-go-to-meeting" outfits?

I believe there is a scriptural argument to be made to encourage godly people to "give thought" to their attire based on circumstances. Joseph, a righteous man, was called before Pharaoh to provide an answer from God and didn't have the "come as

you are" approach. Instead, he "shaved and changed his clothing" before approaching the king (Gen. 41:14). While fishing, the apostle Peter—when learning it was the risen Lord calling to him—"put on his outer garment (for he had removed it)" before swimming ashore (Jn. 21:7). Most people take *off* clothing before plunging into a lake. The only logical explanation is that Peter thought what he had been wearing was inappropriate for the occasion. Even Jesus, in His parable of the wedding feast (Matt. 22), acknowledged that there are situations in which appropriate attire is expected.

If we were invited to visit the White House, most of us would give serious thought about what to wear on such an occasion. When we are invited to a wedding or choose to attend a funeral, we try to dress appropriately. Why should it be any different when commemorating the Lord's

death, burial, and resurrection or hearing the gospel preached?

To be clear, this is not a criticism of those who are unfortunate and cannot afford to "dress up." Certainly, if one who is poor comes into our assembly dressed "in filthy clothes," we must not treat him with disrespect. We must welcome him equally with one dressed in "fine apparel" (Jas. 2:1-4). Instead, my appeal is this—whether we "dress up" for worship or come in casual attire—that our attire is appropriate for the occasion and will not distract from the purpose of our gathering. Give some thought to whether sloppy clothing, shorts, or T-shirts promoting favorite sports teams, commercial products, or political messages seem "appropriate" to wear when assembled with others for the expressed purpose of worshiping our awesome God!

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'IF ONLY'

By NOAH DIESTELKAMP

WE HAVE ALL SAID IT. We have all heard it. Something in our lives is deficient. Some circumstance is less than ideal. Some resource is too scarce. Some action is too difficult. Some relationship is too awkward. "I would love to, *if only...*"

I do not deny that we all have limits. No one can do everything all the time without missing opportunities. Yet, ironically, when we focus on our limitations, we often miss opportunities! If we wait until our budget is "just so" and the circumstance is "just right" and our understanding of Scripture is "finally there" (and the list could go on), we will never take action.

Scripture offers many exhortations to "do," even if what we are able to do is limited (e.g. Matt. 7:24-27; Jas. 1:22-25; 2:14-17; Col. 3:17-24). For today, I encourage you to consider 1 Jn. 3:16-18:

"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, *let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*"

Indeed, loving in word and talk is easy. It ultimately requires nothing of us. Sometimes, we love in word and talk because we really do intend to follow through someday when circumstances are better, when we feel equipped, when life slows down, or when it's more convenient. After all,

"if only" life were a little bit different, we would follow through!

God's call to Christians, however, is not just to have good intentions; He calls us to live out good actions as well. When we lay aside the "if only" and serve from the heart, it is a demonstration of God's love abiding in us. This means that no matter how large or small the task is at hand, the opportunity we have is indeed great!

*If only I made just a little bit more.
If only it cost just a little bit less.
If only I had just a little more time.
If only my house wasn't quite such a mess.
I'd share with the needy. I know I'd give more!
I'd open my home with more zeal than before.
"If only. If only! If only..." I say.
"If only my life had worked out in that way."*

*If only I knew those I see every day.
If only my friendships had come with rapport.
If only I knew all the right words to say.
If only I had ten years' study (or more).
I'd teach the whole Gospel. I'd speak about God.
I'd talk about Jesus and wouldn't feel odd.
"If only. If only! If only..." I say.
"If only my life had worked out in that way."*

*"If only!" "If only?" Is that all I've got?
"If only" will easily serve as a crutch.
"If only" won't help me to serve or to grow.
"If only" rings empty. It won't do me much!
It won't help me study. It won't help me pray.
It won't help tomorrow, nor does it today.
If only I'd give up "if only" and say,
"Today, I will act and no longer delay!"*

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EMBRACING SHADOWS

By ANDY DIESTELKAMP

THE WOUNDED SOLDIER sat alone waiting in anticipation. He had recently returned home from the battle lines where the darkness of foxholes and trenches had been his only protection from the enemy's concerted efforts to destroy him. He was thankful for being rescued, and he was anxious to see his beloved. When the door to his hospital room opened, shadows entered and danced on the wall opposite him. His heart raced. He stood. He stared. As the shapes became more distinct, he ran toward them excitedly. When the woman appeared, she saw her wounded husband embracing the shadows. She called his name, but he would not let go of the wall. She said it was time to go home, but he preferred to zealously cling to the shadows rather than turn and face and embrace reality.

Were we to witness something pathetic like this, it would make us feel very sad. We would conclude that PTSD had claimed yet another victim. Nobody in his right mind would choose to embrace shadows over the actual person.

Perhaps this opening scene gives us some insight into Paul's concern for Israel. He had great sorrow and continual grief in his heart for his kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom. 9:2,3). They had had such an advantage and so much potential. To them belonged "the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the service of God, and the promises" (v 4). Indeed, because of these things they had "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, [had] not submitted to the righteousness of God" (10:2,3). Paul said his "heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel [was] that they may be saved" (v 1); but to submit to the righteousness of God and be saved, they would need to let go of the shadows and embrace Jesus (cf. vv 9,10).

The word *shadow* is used in Scripture in a variety of ways. It can be used negatively or positively. For example, it is sometimes used negatively in connection with darkness or the specter of death. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me" (Ps. 23:4). It is used somewhat neutrally to speak of things that are fleeting in contrast to that which is enduring. It is also used positively in reference to finding relief or comfort in the shadow (i.e. shade) of a tree or tent (e.g. Jonah as he camped outside Nineveh). Likewise, it is used positively of protection as David prayed to God, "in

the shadow of Your wings, I will make my refuge" (Ps. 57:1).

However, in all of these uses (whether literally or figuratively, positively or negatively), there is something more substantial which is understood to be casting the shadow. Indeed, it is actually this substantial something that casts the shadow which we embrace or fear and for which we are either thankful or not. This becomes especially important for us to understand when we come to Christ and His covenant. In the New Testament, *shadow* is used in all of the ways mentioned above. Let's consider how it is specifically used in relation to the old and new covenants.

The book of Hebrews was written to encourage Christians to remain faithful to Jesus even in the midst of intense social pressures and persecution meant to cause them to renounce Christ. To do this, Hebrews emphasizes the superiority of Christ over all things and the truth that He is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets which foretold His coming. Having talked about Jesus being a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, the primary point of the writer of Hebrews is to remind saints that "we have such a High Priest" in Jesus and that He is a minister of "the true tabernacle" built by God and not by man (Heb. 8:1,2).

It is interesting that we are prone to think in opposite ways. We tend to imagine that material things are *real* and that spiritual things are not. The Hebrews author observes that the tabernacle built by Moses "according to the pattern shown [him] on the mountain" was a "copy and shadow" of heavenly things (v 5). The word *copy* implies that it was a representation of but was not the original or actual. Just as a shadow is real but is not the reality of that which casts it, even so the earthly tabernacle (and all that was attached to it) was real but was not the reality of that which it foreshadowed.

Essentially the tabernacle was a visual aid to illustrate the presence of God among His people. Yet, since it was only a shadow, neither it nor its priests, sacrifices, or the covenant attached to it could actually accomplish the remission of sins and the restoration of fellowship with God. "Christ came...with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands" (9:11). He came not with the shadows of animal sacrifices to atone for our sins "but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (v 12). If the copies required the shedding of blood, then the better things under the better covenant required the better sacrifice

of Jesus Christ (v 23). He did not go into "the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (v 24).

We are explicitly told that "the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never...make those who approach perfect" (10:1). Since "it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (v 4), Jesus offered Himself and "by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (v 14). Jesus has actually accomplished what the first covenant merely foreshadowed which effectively makes the first covenant obsolete (8:13). Therefore, why would we hold fast to shadows of the One who has come in the flesh?

When the apostle Paul wrote to the brethren in Colossae, he was concerned that they not be taken captive by the philosophies and persuasive but deceitful words that were according to the traditions of men (Col. 2:4-8). He warned them not to let anyone judge them "in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" (v 16). These he described as "a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (v 17). Paul was concerned that—instead of holding fast to Christ as head—some were being deceived by the doctrines and practices of men and were embracing shadows in submitting to vain rituals, traditions, and doctrines that had the appearance of spirituality and humility but which were of no value against carnality and were themselves fleshly.

So, too, 21st century saints must beware of: 1) being conformed to this world (Rom. 12:1) rather than being conformed to the image of Christ (8:29), 2) being deceived by blending worldly religious philosophy with Christ (syncretism) and thereby being unequally yoked with that which is contrary to Christ (2 Cor. 6:14-16), and 3) imagining heightened spirituality by incorporating obsolete shadows as rituals in our worship of and service to Christ. So many of the traditions which have accumulated over two millennia are borrowed from the shadows of Judaism (sanctuaries, altars, priests, vestments, clergy/laity distinctions, burning of incense, instrumental music, holy days, dietary laws, etc.). Their practices are imagined to be justified by pointing to that which is now obsolete and as out of place in our spiritual service as is fleshly circumcision. Instead of embracing shadows, let's turn toward the light and embrace Jesus Christ.

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The Real Enemy

By MATT HENNECKE

I'M HEADING OFF to a local coffee and cinnamon roll establishment in a few minutes. A young man and I meet on Tuesday mornings to discuss things religious. We're currently reading and discussing Paul Earnhart's book *Invitation to a Spiritual Revolution*. The book explores Jesus' sermon on the mount. It's easy to read, hard to live. That's true of the Bible, too.

It's been a hard week. An assassination of a young man—which should have been a wakeup call to the dangers of over-the-top political animosity—has, instead, increased the vitriol, tension, and hatred that characterizes our country. Name calling has become the norm, and it often explodes into violence. Of course, Jesus addressed such behavior head-on when he cited the second greatest command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Don't fool yourself into justifying hatred of Democrats or Republicans because they're not your neighbors. Of course they are. In the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus said our neigh-

bors aren't just those who live next door to us (Lk. 10:25-37).

Earnhart wrote: "Not only do bitter feelings put one in jeopardy but so also does the contemptuous abuse they are disposed to foster. How many hearts have been brutalized by words that cut like rapiers.... We lash out at people in utter scorn and leave them as we intended, broken." (*Spiritual Revolution*, pg. 43-44).

Here's the thing. Our country, and perhaps even we, have lost sight of the real enemy. We think politicians are the enemy. We think the "other side" is the enemy. We're wrong.

Let me share a story and an observation from a recent *Dispatch* article (September 21, 2025): Someone placed 100 red fire ants and 100 black ants in a jar. At first nothing happened. Then someone aggressively shook the jar and dumped the ants back on the ground. The ants fought to the death. The red ants thought the black ants were the enemy. The black ants thought the red ants were the enemy. But the real enemy was the one who shook the jar.



Do you identify with red states? Blue states? Do you find yourself seething with anger and disgust at the opposition? If so, then you've misidentified the real enemy. Ask yourself, who is shaking the jar? (Jn. 8:44). It would be better to identify with Christ who came seeking the lost (Lk. 19:10). That includes *all* of us. Here's the question: When we hate or when we call names, are we helping Jesus in his mission of atonement or are we helping the real enemy?

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