When you hear the word “sacrifice,” what comes to mind? Is it a positive image or a dreadful one? I guess it depends on the context and who is making the sacrifice.

For most people, when they think of sacrifice, it is a pain that comes to mind. For some, it is a reluctant pain, while for others, dutiful grief. One is forcefully sacrificing because they are not given a choice, and the other is martyrdom for the sake of others because they have to.

Have any of you ever related sacrifice with joy or fulfillment? Jesus did. This has to do with his commandment when he said, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The reason Jesus found joy and fulfillment in sacrificing his time, energy, feelings, and even his life was because he cared for the wellbeing of others, and they welcomed him too.

In Hebrews 12: 2, the author explains it this way, “[This Jesus], for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame.” After endured, you can insert many other things: He endured persecution, offense, false testimony, exhaustion, hunger and thirst, and so on.

When I read passages like Hebrews 12, it tells me that Jesus willingly endured the pain and shame of the cross in anticipation of the joy of bringing life and salvation from sin and death to all people. His was not mindless sacrifice. Jesus was not a glutton of punishment, a masochistic. Instead, I can imagine Jesus when was persecuted and insulted for being compassionate or as he was being arrested and then taken to the cross, able to look right through his enemies to the coming joy—the joy of bringing salvation to those he loves.

What does this mean to us? Why does it matter? The reason why the author of Hebrews is talking about Jesus in such a manner is because in this chapter, he is encouraging the believers to be faithful with hope for the future, and he is telling them, “You need to make an effort in your faith, and here is Jesus as an example.”

For context, the previous chapter 11 recounts remarkable examples of Old Testament faithful and sacrificial obedience of imperfect people (just like you and me) who carried divine tasks and successfully fulfilled their purpose. We are talking about Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, king David, and so on. Their sacrifice was not about wasting away but pursuing a higher calling than their wants. By naming them, the writer says that sacrificing for the right reasons such as goodness, justice, and love brings us joy and life—just like Jesus did.

After he names all these faithful people, then he says, “now, look to Jesus.” All these examples are intended to encourage us in our Christian lives to make us brave and confident and live sacrificially for the sake of being faithful and obedient—never to waste away.

(If we are selfish, greedy, hateful, unforgiving, and full of ourselves (and other stuff), then we are wasting away; or, if we give our time, energy, thoughts, and resources repeatedly to people that are ungrateful and are just taking advantage of us, then we are also wasting away. This is not what I mean by “sacrifice” nor what Jesus did. If this is what you are doing, you will never find joy and fulfillment in your efforts and you will end your lives sad and with a broken soul—and wallet. To make this clear, consider what Jesus said, “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.” (Matthew 7: 6) In simple terms, you can’t be everything to everyone.)

Now, if sacrificing for the sake of others to give them life brought joy to Jesus and gave him the strength to endure his trials, then what kind of sacrifices bring us joy? What kind of divine tasks will help us fulfilled our purpose in life?

The apostle Paul gives a kind of list that is self-explanatory,

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

In this passage, Paul is explaining what it means to live as disciples of Jesus. Often, this passage is titled as, “A Living Sacrifice,” “Marks of Christian Living,” and “Love in Action.” Paul’s exhortation is about how we live in response to God’s love with others.

For sure, this is a great and challenging list of sacrificial divine tasks. They are sacrificial because we are called to do them whether we feel it, like it, or not; they are not easy to do. And the reason they are divine tasks is because that is what Jesus did and asks us to do. Hence, these are marks of Christian faith, character, and behavior. We believe in this; this defines us, and, around other people, we are known by it.

This list can be summarized in four categories.

First, the sacrifice of your speech. Paul is talking about sacrificing the way we speak and engage others.

Do your language and speaking bring you joy? Do the words that come out of your mouth represent your faith and love for God? This is not necessarily about foul language but the motivation and intentions in how we speak. Personally, I have known people who speak a lot of foul language, but they mean no offense—they are kind and generous. But, on the other hand, I have known people that speak politely, but their words are poisonous and treacherous.

The challenge for us here is to be responsible and manage our tongue, so it says, “bless and do not curse.” This sacrifice is a divine task that brings joy.

The second one is the sacrifice of your life. Paul is talking about sacrificing our lives in a manner that pleases God by following and keeping the teachings of Jesus. For example, when Jesus prayed for his enemies, saying, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.” Paul says this is the ultimate “spiritual act of worship.”

Sometimes, this means that we put the other cheek or go the second mile for the sake of others. This is very hard because life many times is unfair, we deal with people that are selfish and unapologetic, but if we seek retribution, we will only hurt others and ourselves. Paul describes this posture as, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” This sacrifice is a divine task that brings joy. (As a side benefit, this will help you sleep well at night.)

Third, the sacrifice of your resources. Paul is talking about sacrificing our wealth or money to serve the needs of others, “Contribute to the needs of the saints,” he said. Whether it is helping someone in need or your support of the church, this sacrifice is a divine task that brings joy. Giving like this is not an investment, a contribution to a greater cause.

And fourth, the sacrifice of your love. Paul is talking about sacrificial love relating to how we treat others. He is urging authenticity in our relationships. This is the foundation for everything: we manage our speech because we love; we “bless and do not curse” because love is greater in us than any resentment; and, we use our money and resources to contribute to the wellbeing of others because we love.

So, Paul is telling us, “Take your every day, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life and place it before God as an offering of love.” This is precisely what the author of Hebrews had in mind when he said, “let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the author and finisher of the faith…”

My friends, this is a lifelong journey where we will get lost, make the wrong turns, break down, give up, hurt people and get hurt by others but we can always get back on track if we remember to look up. This can only be accomplished if we are clear about who we follow and who we are and by not letting the world around us squeeze us into its mold of selfishness. Making the world a better place make us better persons too.

This is where a lot of people get it wrong. I asked at the beginning if sacrificing could bring us joy and fulfillment, the answer is “Yes!” If we pursue life through comfort and selfishness, it will always escape us; but joy and fulfillment are always found when we are willing to do what is kind and right for others—and often that entails sacrificing.

By now, you may have figured out that Christianity is paradoxical; it is both life-affirming and self-denying. Jesus said that we find ourselves by losing ourselves in something outside ourselves. When we are selfish, we are small; when we are self-giving, well, there is no limit to what God can do in and thorough us.

I finish with this quote from Oscar Hammerstein, which is the invitation to respond to this message,

“A bell’s not a bell ’til you ring it - A song’s not a song ’til you sing it - Love in your heart wasn’t put there to stay - Love isn’t love ’til you give it away!”

We begin to get a glimpse of how precious and beautiful life is when we understand love. So, give your best by sacrificing for the sake of being kind, forgiving, and compassionate. These are our divine tasks. And don’t let evil overcome you but overcome evil with all goodness. Make your days count.