

“Acceptable to God”

When I was a child, today’s passage from Romans was used by adults as a weapon against us. Sunday School teachers and pastors would quote just one portion of it, out of context, saying, “I appeal to you therefore ... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” The purpose was to make us afraid that if we did not keep our body as a Temple for God, we would earn eternal damnation.

What did that mean to our admonishers? It meant that we should not smoke or drink, that we should not use profanity, that we should not have naughty thoughts or desires, and that we should always obey authority. Of course it also meant going to church, saying our prayers, reading the Bible, preparing for Sunday School, and pretty much anything else that had to do with church. That was a lot for that one phrase to carry, but they did not have any trouble piling it on.

This was of particular emphasis when we were teenagers, or maybe we were just more attuned to it then. After all, that was the age of experimenting. It was also the age of new feelings, hormones, muscles, toys being replaced by other distractions, and so much more. Scaring kids into behaving worked with Santa Claus at Christmas. Now that we were older, it was St. Paul.

The funny thing is that the most rebellious thing that my friends and I ever did was prop open the windows to the church basement so that we could hang out and play ping pong on Sunday afternoons. Yes, that is right; we were such church nerds that we all wanted to hang out at church after hours. We also demanded that we be allowed to participate in Vacation Bible School after we aged out. A group of boys in sixth grade who did not want to forego VBS just because we were too old. The leaders were flabbergasted. They scrambled to find something for us to do.

Given our nerdiness (a word that did not exist at the time), it is surprising that anyone bothered to use Paul’s words on us. Our rebellions, if you could call them that, were mild indeed. However, Paul’s admonitions, as expanded by our elders, remain part of my psyche. I still have a hard time not feeling guilty about almost everything.

Paul and Augustine of Hippo felt the need to slap a guilt trip on the Western consciousness. They have done a good job for the last two thousand years. I wonder what Jesus would say about that. As I read the Gospels, the overarching theme of Jesus’s ministry is forgiveness. He sometimes said, Go and sin no more, but he does not try to increase people’s pain and insecurity. He loved people, especially outsiders and those that society and religion called sinners.

Years ago I asked this congregation to write on notecards what words or attributes they ascribed to God. These are some of the responses:

- Confidant (2)
- Peacemaker, Peace giver, and Peace finder (2)
- Father
- Love
- Comforter
- The beauty of nature
- My teacher of life
- The love that parents give

- Joy
- Acceptance
- Consistency amidst turbulence
- Reminder of peace and faith
- He is the one that I feel safe and can pray to. He keeps me going.

I also asked what attributes congregants give to Jesus. They wrote:

- My savior, salvation, sacrifice, redeemer (7)
- The example I try to emulate (7)
- Friend, companion, companion for life (6)
- Foundation (2)
- Helps me fight the bad voices in my head
- Personification of God
- Moral teacher
- An enigma I'm slowly getting to know
- A man who is searching

The thoughts about God are wide-ranging and different across individuals. In contrast, the people in this congregation named very similar attributes for Jesus. That we find Jesus more relatable than God is not surprising since Jesus lived among us.

That said, none of the aspects named for God or Jesus were negative. No one wrote punisher, rule maker, mean, wrathful, or admonisher. It seems this congregation is free from the negative theology of Paul and Augustine. Or do you suppose we are wanton revelers who are breaking one commandment after another? Is this a crowd of moral profligates? Perhaps we are all on the road to perdition because we are not following the rules of the early church fathers? I do not think so.

I expect we all miss the mark daily or many times a day. I would not be surprised if we do not always choose the way of love even when it is staring us in the face. I think we all feel the tug of society and give in sometimes. It can be a struggle.

A wise person wrote, "Every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, 'This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this!' And each day, it's up to you to yank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, 'No. This is what's important.'"¹

No matter our failures, real or imagined, if we can put our hand on our heart at the end of the day and say to the world and to God, "No. This is what's important." We are doing as Paul commanded by presenting our "bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

I find the following prayer of Thomas Merton to be one that bolsters me and inspires me. Let us pray.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually

¹ Ian Campbell Thomas (born 23 July 1950) is a [Juno Award](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Campbell_Thomas)-winning Canadian singer-songwriter, actor and author. Best known for his 1973 hit "[Painted Ladies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Painted_Ladies)" and his role on [The Red Green Show](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Red_Green_Show) as Dougie Franklin. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ian_Thomas_%28Canadian_musician%29 accessed August 21, 2026.

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Holy Eucharist, Rite Two 10:00 a.m.
August 23, 2026

doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”²

May this prayer and your positive visions of God and Jesus be the light that lightens your path. May it keep at bay not only the distractions of the world but also the hurtful prescriptions of hurtful theologies. God is love in all aspects—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let that love shine in you and through you as you live out your desire to please God in all that you do.

² Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1956, 1958), p.79.