SACRIFICES THAT PLEASE GOD

Hebrews 13:1–25

Key Verses: 13:15,16

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

What does worship mean to you? For some people it means to go to a church service on Sunday mornings. Yet even if we do that, often we don’t think about it much. In today’s passage the author urges Christians to have true worship—not just once a week, but in our daily lives. What is true worship? How do we do it? Why do we do it? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In this letter to the Hebrews the author has used the word “worship” seven times (1:6; 9:1,9; 10:1,2; 11:21; 12:28). In the Old Testament God gave his people clear teachings on how they should worship him at the earthly sanctuary. People were to come and give God their gifts and sacrifices. The problem was, these worship activities could not clear their consciences of the guilt they felt due to their sins. People drew near to God year after year through animal sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, but it never helped them grow. Despite all their worship, deep inside they still felt guilty. But God sent Jesus to be our Great High Priest, and he offered once and for all the best sacrifice ever given: himself. Jesus gave his own body and shed his own blood to forgive our sins and make us perfect forever (10:14). Jesus made all those old animal sacrifices obsolete. Now, through Jesus we can truly draw near to God, and our guilty consciences can be cleansed. Moreover, through Jesus our Great High Priest we have a new hope (3:6; 6:11; 7:19; 10:23; 11:1). It’s the hope of heaven. What’s the basis of this hope? Our Lord Jesus is now at God’s right hand in heaven (1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2), and he wants to bring each of us who believes in him to be there with him. It’s called our shared “heavenly calling” (3:1). This heavenly gift is so real, it’s something we can even “taste” (6:4). It gives us the hope to one day “see the Lord” (12:14). All the rules for worship God had given were only a copy and shadow of what’s going on in heaven (8:5; 9:23–25). In heaven, all God’s angels are worshiping Jesus our Great High Priest (1:6). And we who believe in him are longing for this heavenly hope (11:16). When these Hebrew Christians didn’t stick to the old covenant with all its regulations, they were publicly exposed to insult and persecution, and even their property was confiscated (10:33,34). Like the saints of old, they were destitute, persecuted and mistreated (11:37). But they were looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (11:10). They were longing for this better, heavenly country—the city God has prepared for us (11:16). It’s called “the city of the living God,” “the heavenly Jerusalem” (12:22), and “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28).

In light of what Jesus our Great High Priest has done for us, in light of this heavenly hope, what should we do? Read 12:28. We should respond to God’s grace with true worship. What is true worship? It says here that it needs to be “acceptable.” What makes worship “acceptable”? It needs to be full of “reverence and awe.” In other words, when we come to God, we need to focus on who he really is. The author says, “…for our God is a consuming fire” (12:29). It’s a reference to his holiness. We need to have an awesome respect for the Holy God. We shouldn’t be treating him habitually, casually, or recklessly; we need to be aware of his awesome, holy presence. We also need to be aware of his great grace. The Holy God is the one giving us this kingdom that cannot be shaken, through our Great High Priest, Jesus. We need to really appreciate it. When we come to him in worship, we need to be truly thankful for what he’s done for us.

On the basis of this, in chapter 13 the author goes on to show us that this thankful worship should also impact our daily lives. How so? Read verse 1. The first way we show true worship of God is in how we treat our fellow Christians. It says, “Keep on loving.” It’s also translated as “Love must continue.” We can’t be worshiping God acceptably and at the same time, be treating one another superficially or badly (cf. 1Jn4:20). How should we be treating our fellow Christians? It says “as brothers and sisters.” It means our love for each other should be so deep, so loyal, so fervent, so dear, so constant. Like our Lord Jesus, we should consider all those committed to doing God’s will as our true mother and sister and brothers (Mk3:31–35). Our Lord Jesus warned us that as time goes by, as wickedness increases, our love for one another can grow cold (Mt24:12). So the Bible urges us, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1Pe4:8).

In verses 2–5 the author goes on to show us more ways of how we can express our love practically. Read verse 2. We worship God truly as we show hospitality even to strangers. In the ancient world these “strangers” might have been fellow Christians fleeing persecution and needing a place to stay. But “strangers” can also mean just anyone we meet, anyone who’s lonely and in need. The reference to people serving angels without knowing it may be to Abraham who served the three guests who came to him in the heat of the day (Ge18:1–8), or to Gideon (Jdg6:11–40), or to Manoah (Jdg13:2–25). This verse is not teaching us to be afraid that angels might be visiting us in the form of strangers, but rather, to treat each human being, no matter how strange they may seem, as those created in the image of God, and so precious. It says here that we shouldn’t “forget” to do it. We can get so busy doing so many things, even religious things, and then, like the people in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, pass by a fellow suffering human being, thinking we’ve got no time for them (Lk10:25–37). As we keep on loving our fellow believers as brothers and sisters, we also should keep showing hospitality even to strangers as our true worship of God, who made us all.

Read verse 3. Again, at that time this might have been referring to persecuted Christians. But it also can refer to anyone in prison. Our Lord Jesus gave us some of the most memorable and hauntingly beautiful words in the Bible: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me…Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt25:35,36,40). It says here, “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” It means to empathize, to feel how lonely, isolated and crushed these people must be. It’s no fun thinking about such suffering people. But to truly worship God, we can’t ignore or forget those who are suffering. Here the word “remember” is important. Though the world soon forgets such suffering people, God never forgets, and neither should we. “Remember” also means to go to visit them when we can, and, to keep praying for them.

Read verse 4. This is another way we express true worship and true love for one another: by honoring marriage. We honor marriage not only by enjoying going to weddings, but by how we really behave in our relationships. We encourage one another to stay deeply committed to our marriages. If we’re single, we save ourselves for marriage. Our Lord Jesus said we live in an unbelieving and perverse generation (Mt17:17), so we need to be on guard to be faithful to our spouse, in body, heart and mind, and truly thankful for our spouse.

Read verse 5. We keep loving one another when we don’t lose our hearts to the love of money. Love of money can creep into our lives more than we realize, so we have to be vigilant against it. Why? Because we can’t truly worship God when we love money. This doesn’t mean we have to live an ascetic life, rejecting all material things as evil. The Bible says, “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving…” (1Ti4:4). But the Bible also says, “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1Ti6:7–10). So how can we be content? Verse 5b reads, “..because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” We can be truly content when we realize we have God himself; God himself is our shield and our very great reward (Ge15:1). People try to amass money so that they can feel secure and protect themselves. But we don’t have to do that. Read verse 6. We can overcome the temptation to love money when we depend on God himself to help us. Living in this materialistic culture may God help us to vigilantly repent of loving money and material things.

The author goes on to describe a very special kind of love we should practice, a love that further expresses our worship of God. Read verse 7. Who are our leaders? They are not just people in positions of leadership. It says here that they are those “who spoke the word of God” to us, and whose way of life was Christlike. What does it mean to “remember” them? It may imply that they were now dead. Here it says “Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” We shouldn’t just be thankful for them, but strive to imitate their lives of faith. It’s another way our worship of God becomes more genuine.

Then the author goes on to make a profound statement. Read verse 8. Why does he suddenly say this? It’s in the context of remembering our leaders. One of the main themes of Hebrews is that Jesus is superior. He’s superior to Moses, to the old covenant, to the high priesthood, and here, he’s superior to even the best spiritual leaders we’ve ever had. Why is Jesus superior? Because Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever. Jesus our Great High Priest ever lives to intercede for us (7:25). Jesus is way more faithful than even the most faithful person we know. Though our human shepherds can’t be with us forever, Jesus can. We can always rely on him. When we remember Jesus, consider his way of life and imitate him, we can truly worship God.

Look at verses 9,10. These Hebrew Christians were being pressured to go back to the Jewish dietary laws and food offered at the temple. Here the author calls this “strange teachings.” 1 Corinthians 8:8 says, “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.” In fact, any kind of legalism is a “strange teaching.” Sacrificing holidays such as Valentine’s Day is a strange kind of legalism. Refusing to see a movie can be a strange kind of legalism. Even Bible study, meetings, going fishing and having 1:1 Bible studies can become a strange kind of legalism. When does it get strange? When we’re doing these things to prove that I’m righteous and better than others. Why are we prone to be carried away by various kinds of legalism? Because legalism gives us a false sense of security. Legalism is easier than depending on God’s grace, which seems so risky and intangible. But it’s only God’s grace that can strengthen our hearts—not legalism. How can our hearts be strengthened by his grace? We need to really meditate on God’s grace to me personally. In 2 Timothy 2:1 Paul wrote, “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” Strict legalism doesn’t make us strong; Jesus’ grace makes us truly strong, strong enough to really worship God.

Look at verse 11. Here the author again mentions what the high priest did with the bodies and blood of animals sacrificed at the temple. The blood was a sin offering in the Most Holy Place, and the bodies were burned outside the camp. Why were the bodies of these animals treated like this? Because dead bodies were considered unclean (Lev21:11; Nu19:11). Read verse 12. When Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem at Calvary, it was not because he was unclean; it was to make us holy through his own blood. How should we respond to this? Read verse 13. These Hebrew Christians were treated as apostates and were shunned from the Jewish community. It was just a shadow of what all Christians go through. When we commit our lives to Jesus, the world hates us as it hated Jesus (Jn15:18,19). We love to be honored; we really don’t like to be shamed or disgraced. But if we’re going to truly worship God and follow our Lord Jesus, we need to bear the disgrace he bore. We need to identify with our Lord Jesus, not the world. How can we do that? Read verse 14. When we realize that this world and its desires pass away (1Jn2:17) and keep looking forward to our hope in heaven, we can bear the disgrace involved in following our Lord.

Read verses 15,16. These are the author’s conclusion in this chapter. We learn here that true worship involves making sacrifices. But now that our Lord Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, what sacrifices are pleasing to God? The first one is “a sacrifice of praise.” We should be offering this sacrifice to God “continually.” If we profess his name, if we confess our faith in Jesus, we should be using our lips not to complain but to praise God (Jas3:10). But how can we be praising God continually? We have to be intentional. In the morning when we first wake up, we can pray personally and praise God. When we stop for lunch in the middle of the day, we can pray again and praise God. When we get ready for bed, we can stop to pray and praise God once more. It doesn’t mean we should be giving God lip service praise all the time, or always telling people to praise God as if it’s a show. But we should quietly be praising God very personally. It should come from our hearts, and then be on our lips. This is true worship.

The other sacrifice that pleases God is doing good and sharing with others. Some people think God will be pleased with the great monetary sacrifices they make at church. To be sure, if we remember the grace of Jesus, we should be giving generously to God’s work (2Co8:9). But perhaps even more important than financial offerings to church is how we live among people. We should always be doing good and sharing what we have. As we’ve said earlier, many sacrifices can become a strange kind of legalism. One of them is fasting. We may think that by fasting and praying we’re making sacrifices pleasing to God. But Isaiah 58:6,7 says, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see them naked to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?” Obviously God has always been more pleased with good deeds and sharing our material things with the needy than sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. Truly worshiping God is not just about going to church on Sundays; it’s about praising God personally throughout the day, doing good and sharing with others whenever we have the chance.

Read verse 17. The author again teaches us how to treat our leaders. Instead of harboring criticism and being resistant, we should have confidence in them and submit to them. We also should respect their work as spiritual overseers before God. And we should be striving to find ways to make their work a joy, not a burden. This is another way we worship God truly.

In verses 18,19 the author asks for their prayers personally. Read verses 20,21. Here we learn that God is the God of peace. He brought Jesus back from the dead. We also learn that Jesus is the Great Shepherd of the sheep who shed the eternal blood of the covenant for us. He’s the one we truly worship. We need God to equip us with everything good for doing his will. And only God can work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus, who receives all the glory forever.

Read verses 15,16 again. May God help us repent of our complaining. May God help us to repent of our selfishness. May God help us offer the sacrifices of praise and of doing good and sharing. May he help us grow in relying on the grace of our Lord Jesus, our Great Shepherd and Great High Priest.