

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 50 April 16, 2023

Sacrifice, Obey and Pray

## Hebrews 13:15-19

### Introduction

Quite often in the NT, a single verse, or sometimes, a pair of verses tends to capture the theme or message of whole book. That is true of Romans 1:17; Galatians 2:16; I John 2:3 and many others. In Hebrews, it is arguable that Hebrews 13:15 is such a verse for this book – at least it should be on the list of key verses. But, unlike Romans or Galatians, this book is not focussed in on the doctrine of justification by faith, although it certainly supports that teaching and even advances it in many passages we have already studied.

Hebrews is more centered on the superiority of Jesus Christ over anything one could consider, and a pre-occupation with His present role as our great High Priest and Mediator of the New Covenant. Certainly, His substitutionary atonement is also central to the theme as the author, whose knowledge of the OT and the Judaistic system ( Old Covenant ) compares and contrasts His priestly role with the fading and soon ( 70 AD ) to be non-existent role of Jewish priests and the sacrifice of animals.

In all of this, and with the immensely important chapter 11 behind us, in the body of Hebrews, we are taught that it is utterly futile to offer any sacrifice or to try to provide God with any service, no matter how pious or well-meaning, except “through Jesus Christ.” The author’s constant concern has been to convince Hebrew converts to Christ to avoid apostasy, which some were in danger of falling into ( likely because of their fear of persistent persecution ), and which would have cut them off from access to God, because that access is only available “through Jesus Christ.”

### A Sacrifice of Praise / Sacrifice That Pleases God vv. 15-16

Back in vv. 10-11, the author argued that we have an altar – it is not as if Christians have no protocol for worship, and since our worship revolves around the Cross of Christ ( our ‘altar’ ), the sacrifice of Christ and our acceptance of His substitution by grace through faith, confirms that no one can now worship God rightly who does not follow that same prescription.

So we do have ( v. 15 ) a sacrifice we offer to God – but it is not an animal or grain in order to have our sins atoned for – that has been accomplished on our behalf already – but our sacrifice is of our whole life ( cf. Romans 12:1-2 ), not for forgiveness of sins but out of gratitude and praise! “Believers give praise to God through Jesus Christ because He has cleansed their conscience so they are free from the guilt of sin.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 423

The Greek words used in v. 15 for “*sacrifice of praise*” are the same words used in the Septuagint ( the Greek translation of the OT ) in Leviticus 7:12-13 – the ‘thank offering.’ Jews who wished to express gratitude to God offered bread, cakes or grain to the priests who were in God’s service. This is similar to our offering to God our goods, financial resources and our gifts, talents and ourselves as we thankfully serve others in our circle of influence – church, family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc.

Paul’s somewhat famous ( at least to mature believers ) verses regarding a believer’s right response to the truth of the Gospel ( rightly understood ) passage in Romans 12:1-2, appeals for us to have a comprehensive response to God’s grace in our lives.

Richard Phillips once again, nails his response to this truth from Romans 12: “What a contrast this is to the way many view Christianity. For many, the highest aspiration is simply to “get saved.” If they can just make it to heaven, that will be good enough for them. But this is not all that Christianity is about. Justification, a doctrine we rightly emphasize, is not the end of our salvation, but rather the means to a life of pleasing service unto God. Justification is often called the hinge on which the door of the gospel turns, and that is certainly true, but it is a door that is meant to be opened, to give us entrance into the presence of God, that we may live with joy and awe as royal children in this world, and offer our lives as sacrifices of praise for his service and pleasure. Jesus said that the Father is seeking worshippers to worship him in spirit and truth ( JN 4:23-24 ). It is for this that we are saved, to live sacrificially unto him, to offer a lifestyle of worship, for the blessing of others and for the glory of his name.”<sup>2</sup>

This exhortation for our thankful praise comes in the context of vv. 13-14 – by the phrase “*through him then let us...*” of v. 15, and the next word, “*continually*.” This is not telling us we all must leave our secular jobs and become full-time Christian workers. That is the call for some, of course, but God wants most of us to realize that whatever our vocation, this devotion to Christ is to be our constant direction – Paul says it well in Col. 3:17.

This concept of a “*sacrifice of praise*” is not a small aspect in the corner of belief, but is touted throughout the OT and of course in the NT. Note some of these passages: Psalms 22:1-3, in the context of prophetically expressing Jesus’ thoughts on the cross, as He is challenged to comprehend why God has forsaken Him! In the pit of deepest affliction, we are to understand God’s holiness and to comprehend that our greatest opportunity to give Him the praise of our lips is provided to us when our way seems the bleakest. He is to reign “*enthroned on our praise*” because we are His people, and we know He allows nothing to enter our lives that He has not designed for our good and His glory – the reason for our praise – to glorify Him.

Elsewhere, this concept is on display in Psalms 50:14-15; 107:21-22 & 116:16-19. Matthew 12:34 also alludes to it. Our speech and our actions are gauges of our true spiritual condition – note a negative view in Romans 3:13-14, and consider James

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 612

3:6,8. Verse 15 here in Hebrews 13 then explains what this sacrifice of praise consists of, *“that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name.”* The phrase is an allusion to Hosea 14:2, where one’s lips are seen as ‘altars’ on which our hearts worship God. Hosea 14:2 in the ESV is not as clear a translation as is found in the HCSB – “take words of repentance with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him, *“Forgive all our iniquity and accept what is good, so that we may repay you with praise from our lips.”*

We need to cultivate, by prayer and meditation on God’s Word, this sacrificial devotion to God in our hearts, from which source, our lips will praise Him. The whole point of this passage, this verse, is that the sanctification of our hearts is the key, and once that is achieved, “our speech will give way to encouraging, edifying, wise and God-praising words.”<sup>3</sup> Note Ephesians 4:29 & Phil. 4:14-18 ( especially v. 18 ).

V. 16 – The practical outworking of this *“sacrifice of praise”* is to *“not neglect to do good and to share what you have”*, thus pleasing God. This speaks of generosity and selflessness, an obvious display that we love others and their well-being more than our own wealth and time. Paul’s take on this in Eph. 4:28 is an interesting related point as well, and his narrative of praise in II Cor. 8:1-5 is also a great example of this mindset, even when some are in deep need themselves to share what they can with others who are in worse circumstances. ( see also II Cor. 9:11-15 ).

Jesus reminded His hearers ( Matt. 6:24 ) that *“you cannot serve God and money,”* and James expressed in James 1:27 that true religion is revealed by how we treat those who are afflicted. The words of George Guthrie are good on this point; “Money is an area that tests the authenticity of our devotion to God. The heart that is too close to the back pocket is out of place and grows numb to the good gifts and provisions of God. [ Our use of money ] provides an arena in which great spiritual vitality can be grown and demonstrated.”<sup>4</sup>

## Obey Your Leaders

### v. 17

Verses 15-16 have been discussing our submission – our desire to please God; although the word is not used in those verses, the concept is certainly there. Now, in v. 17, the AH uses the word along with the word “obey.” God has given us leaders who *“spoke to us the Word of God”* ( Heb. 13:7 ); and who Paul tells us were God’s gift to the church ( Eph. 4:11-15 ); and who were appointed by God to guide us in our lives as we ‘walk’ to whatever God has prepared for us ( Eph. 2:10 ). So, we are to obey them, and to submit to their God-given authority because it is from God ( cf. Romans 13:1-2 ).

The concept of church laity obeying and submitting to their pastor and other church leaders is also found in I Cor. 16:15-16; I Thess. 5:12-13 and I Pet. 5:5. The AH assures by this that the leaders are worthy of the people’s obedience and submission. If the leaders should stray into some deviation in doctrine or an interpretation of

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, p. 614

<sup>4</sup> George Guthrie, cited in Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 615

God's Word that is obviously foreign to the text – they should be challenged and corrected, and led to the correct way to preach and to worship Christ – as was Apollos – by Priscilla and Aquilla in Acts 18:24-28. So, submission to leaders is not universal. However, having said this, it is not a licence to challenge every word from the pulpit or every decision of our elected church leaders. Consider the actions of the Bereans in Acts 17:10-11, and the preaching of Paul and Silas.

But this idea that pastors deviating from Scripture and deceiving their people is thankfully the exception rather than the rule ( especially at EBC ). Generally, the author anticipates that our spiritual leaders have our best interests at heart, as he expresses in the rest of v. 17, especially the second part, *“for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.”*

Bruce Ware's comments are helpful here:

“One of the strongest and most sobering expressions of this elder authority that is due to elder responsibility comes from the writer to the Hebrews, who admonishes, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Notice the authority they have flows out of the sobering and weighty responsibility they are given. Because elders have the burden of the souls of the flock on their shoulders, their authority in spiritual matters should be acknowledged and followed. Their biblical and doctrinal teaching should be embraced, their directives for spiritual growth should be followed, and their counsel for spiritual well-being should be welcomed.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the One to whom our leaders must give an account is God. They are under-shepherds. Overseers are given great responsibility by God to care for His flock. They serve the Chief Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, Christ. “They do not enjoy unbridled power, for they will give account on the final day of their own ministry, and thus, their ministry is to be exercised.”<sup>6</sup> Note Paul's comments about his own style of ensuring that what he teaches accords with God's Word – Acts 24:16.

The last part of v. 17 rounds out the author's thoughts, as Richard Phillips comments, “Our obedience [ and submission ] is what makes spiritual leadership a joy and not a burden. Without a doubt, the single greatest discouragement any pastor faces is a congregation that will not believe what he is teaching from the Word of God. This is what wears a minister down: not hard hours of labor, but frustration with a hard-hearted flock. The greatest gift a Christian can give to a spiritual leader is a readiness to believe and obey God's Word.”<sup>7</sup> ( emphasis is mine )

This not only benefits our leaders and pleases God, but is of great blessing to us. Should we discourage them, their ministry would be *“of no benefit to us.”* If the pastor

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce Ware, in *Shepherding God's Flock*, Benjamin Merkle and Thomas Schreiner, Kregel, 2014, p. 304

<sup>6</sup> Schreiner, p. 424

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, pp 617-618

is grieved, it is going to affect the tone and impact of his exegesis and presentation of the Bible's message.

## Pray for Your Leaders

vv. 18-19

Those called to such a ministry by God require His grace to be operative on them constantly. Paul's words in II Cor. 2:14-17 speak of his realization that without Christ and His grace, who could even fulfill their ministry office? *"Who is sufficient for these things?"* later on, in II Cor. 11:23-29 ( especially v. 28 ), he writes of his troubled ministry of suffering and adds to the list, interestingly, of physical trials to the psychological effect of his *"anxiety for all the churches."*

So, having this sort of anxiety and concern for people's souls, the author asks for, and covets ( in a godly way of coveting ), their prayers on his behalf and apparently, for "us" – for other leaders they have. Notice what he is requesting them to pray for – *"that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things."* Schreiner considers it a possibility that this writer was under some sort of government persecution himself, because he says he wants prayer so that he has a *"clear conscience."*

Since the author also mentions in v. 19 that *"I may be restored to you the sooner,"* it is possible he is detained because he is in prison, but that is not certain as he makes no direct reference to that. But he does want to come and see them ( with Timothy – Heb. 13:23 ) once he is able – so he can encourage them face to face. The author was known personally by these people – which would help them to pray for him. It is much easier to pray for someone you know personally, rather than a faceless, nameless person you are only aware of.

We are likely aware of this concept in our prayers for missionary families we support financially and in prayer. It is after they visit us to present their ministries and ongoing struggles that we can pray for them more personally because you can now s "see" them in your mind's eye.

If we fail to pray for our pastor regularly, then we do not truly understand the great burden he carries on our behalf, or his importance to our own spiritual journey, or the frailty of his human nature. He is like us – susceptible to temptation and with a human tendency to seek pleasure in the flesh. We must pray for his protection, both from spiritual danger, and the siren call of the world. We live in a time where we have seen many well-known 'Christian' pastors fall seriously and very publicly. If such well-known public figures, who, unfortunately, represent the face of Christianity before an already skeptical and hateful public, can fall so disastrously, what of those who labour in small churches like ours without fanfare or fame or notoriety, but just diligently and honourably and faithfully watch over our souls – are they not in even more danger? We must pray for our pastor and our leaders!