

July 3, 2011 by Steve Brandon



Better Worship

Hebrews 13:15-19

1. Sing (verse 15)
2. Serve (verse 16)
3. Obey (verse 17)
4. Pray (verses 18-19)

One of the phenomena that all parents eventually face is the experience of the empty nest--that is, the time when all of the children move away from home. And all of a sudden, all is quiet. Those things that used to consume your time are no longer upon you. When you clean a room, it doesn't spontaneously get messy again. Cookies don't magically disappear. You no longer need to attend all the ball games and performances and art shows and endless activities. You no longer need to correct the grammar of your children. Teaching times and training times are a thing of the past. The gas in your car lasts a bit longer. The food in the pantry lasts a bit longer. The clothing budget reduces.

This event is so traumatic for many, that it has a name: The Empty Nest Syndrome. When this happens, many adults lose their way. So much of their life has been caught up with their children, that they just don't know what to do with themselves. Some find themselves married to a complete stranger, and end up divorcing. Others fall into a depression because they have lost purpose in life. What empty nesters need is another purpose in life, apart from their growing children. Something is gone. They need to fill the vacuum with something else.

Well, as we come to our exposition of the book of Hebrews this morning, we find the readers in a similar boat. The author has argued over and over and over and over again of the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is better than the angels. He is better than Moses or Joshua. He is better than Aaron or any of the high priests. He brought in a better covenant through a better sacrifice and will bring us to a better tabernacle, a heavenly one. And in light of the supremacy of Jesus Christ, we ought to continue on in our faith. We need to endure until the end. Or, I have summarized the book of Hebrews with one phrase, "Jesus is better, so press on!"

But, the question that remains is this. If Jesus is better, and the Old Covenant has become obsolete (8:13), and there is no longer any need for the priests (7:28), and the sacrifices are no longer necessary (10:11-14), then, what are we supposed to do? How are we to approach God? What is our worship to be like? Those of the early first century were like those whose children have left the nest. They are seeking to find their way now that things have changed. These are the answers that I believe are answered in our text this morning: Hebrews 13:15-19.

Hebrews 13:15-19

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.

First of all, I want for you to notice the repetition of the sacrificial language.

"Through Him then, let us continually offer up a **sacrifice** of praise to God" (verse 15).

"And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such **sacrifices** God is pleased" (verse 16).

The writer to the Hebrews takes the imagery of the Old Covenant sacrifices and reapplies them to the New Covenant. However, rather than being animal sacrifices, they are a different sort of sacrifice. In verse 15, we have a sacrifice of praise. That is, worship and praise and honor that comes out of our mouth to Jesus Christ. In verse 16, we have the sacrifices of good works. That is, the doing good and sharing, the considering others as more important than yourselves, the giving of yourself to others.

New Covenant worshipers are no longer to be engaged in animal sacrifices. Instead, we are to be engaged in sacrifices of praise. Instead, we are to be engaged in sacrifices of good works. The mercy of God in Jesus Christ has so transformed us that we give our all to him.

Paul said in Romans 12:1, "I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." In other words, because of the mercies of God that have come to us in Jesus Christ, our proper response is to give all to Him! That's what replaces the Old Covenant sacrifices. That's our purpose in life.

And we see this here in verse 15. My point is simply this, ...

1. Sing (verse 15)

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

There it is, "the sacrifice of praise." Singing to God. Worshiping God. Lifting high his name. "Offering up" our praise, just as the smoke of the sacrifices were "offered up" to God.

Now, technically, verse 15 doesn't say that we need to "sing." We are simply called to "offer up a sacrifice of praise to God." Praise can come in various forms. We can speak His praise. We can shout His praise. We can even whisper His praise. But notice that the "praise" given here is vocal: "...that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." There's the definition of what the author is getting at. He's talking about that which comes out of our mouths, "the fruit of lips." This can be speaking or shouting or whispering. It doesn't have to be "singing."

Now, the reason why I have called this point, "sing," is because praise so naturally comes out in song. It's the call of many Psalms. Psalm 95:1 says, "Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation." Psalm 96:1 calls us to, "Sing to the LORD a new song; Sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless His name." Psalm 100:2 instructs to, "Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before Him with joyful singing." That's just to name a few.

I hope that you notice that these are all the call of Old Testament worship. God's people are to be a singing people. God's people are to sing with joy and happiness and gladness. Just as empty nesters are to gain a renewed purpose in life, it's not as if their purpose is entirely new. As they have brought up their children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4), so also are they to continue themselves in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. So here, it's not as if the worship of the New Covenant is much different than the worship of the Old Covenant. But, rather, it is heightened.

It's one thing for an Old Covenant worshiper to sing for joy. It's another thing entirely for us in the New Covenant to sing for joy. Our thrill in the gospel ought to far exceed their joy in temple-based worship. Because, what we have is better than what they had. That's why I have entitled my message this morning, "Better Worship."

Now, I want for you to notice a few things about this New Covenant worship. First of all, it comes through Jesus. Verse 15 says, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise." That is, our worship of God comes through Jesus. That is, it is exclusive. We don't worship God through animal sacrifices. We don't worship God through priests. We don't worship God through any particular ritual. Rather, our worship of God comes through Jesus Christ. He purchased our redemption. He is our great high priest. We come to God through His mediatorial work. Jesus, Himself said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). And, just as we come to God through Jesus for our salvation, so also to we come to God through Jesus for our worship.

I also want for you to notice how our worship is continual. Verse 15 says, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise." That is, in any and every circumstance, we are to worship the Lord. There is never a time when we ought not to be offering up our sacrifice of praise. It doesn't mean that we always need to be singing audibly. But it does mean that we should have a song in our heart at all times, 24/7, so that when we can express it, praise will come forth from our lips. This is Paul's heart in 1 Thessalonians 5: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). Again, this takes Old Covenant worship and magnifies it, because worship is far beyond singing in the assembly. It is full-time, singing in our hearts to the Lord. Sunday is an expression of everything we have done all week long.

And primarily, the content of what's coming out of our mouths is "thanks." A heart of gratitude to the Lord for the blessings He has given to us. And when you understand the book of Hebrews, you understand how great is the gift of Christ to us. We ought to be a thankful people, not complaining people. So, sing!

Well, let's move on to verse 16 and my second point. I'm calling this, ...
2. Serve (verse 16)

We should sing (verse 15). We should serve (verse 16).

Hebrews 13:16
And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

"Doing good" is simply observing the needs of those around you, and doing what is beneficial for them. "Sharing" is simply allowing the things that you have to be used by others -- your home, your car, your tools, your time, your skills. Both of these things together is the golden rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Jesus said it this way, "In everything, ... treat people the same way you want them to treat you" (Matt. 7:12). James calls this the "royal law"-- loving your neighbor as yourself (James 2:8). Paul said that "he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law ... 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Romans 13:8-10). And this is very difficult to do.

We are self-centered people, who are in need ourselves. We need to work hard simply to provide a living for ourselves. The things that we own are quite consuming in and of themselves. And so, it's hard to look outside of ourselves. I think that this is why verse 16 calls it a "sacrifice." A literal sacrifice is completely given to the Lord. You take a bull or a goat or a lamb, and you take its life and you burn it up on the altar. And so also is this call to serve a sacrifice as well.

But, it's possible to serve. Consider the early church. They committed themselves "to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). They committed themselves to sharing their lives with each other. The result? They were "selling their

property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" to such an extent that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 2:45; 4:34). They took care of the widows in their church (Acts 6:1-7). And when the persecution of Christians was strong in Jerusalem, the churches from all over gathered up a collection, for those in need in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:3).

Listen to Paul's testimony of the sacrifice that the churches of Macedonia made. He writes, "I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints" (2 Cor. 8:3-4). In other words, those of the churches of Macedonia gave more than they could afford to give. Furthermore, they begged to be able to give to the need of Christians in other parts of the world. Such was their joy in the Lord. Such was their heart of sacrifice.

And so, church family, I would encourage you to give. Be givers. Be a giving people. I think of a man doing work in Nepal, working with orphans and widows. As he can't be in Nepal all of the time, he has hired some native Nepalis to help run the organizations. He has told me that when he looks to hire someone, he looks for the givers. In a country like Nepal, and in our own country, so many people are takers. He wants to find the givers. They are the ones who can be trusted.

Give financially to those who need it. Give to the church. Give to missions. Give to those in need. And beyond financially, give of yourself. Be with other people. Love other people. Sacrifice for other people.

Hebrews 13:1-3

Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.

Don't neglect it. Isn't that what verse 16 says? "Do not neglect doing good and sharing." Literally, "don't leave it behind." Rather, bring your sacrifice of good deeds wherever you go.

And there is incentive in this verse. Look at the last half of verse 16, "for with such sacrifices God is pleased." The worship of God through Old Covenant sacrifices was predicated on seeking to please God. As the smoke of the sacrifice ascended, you sought to put a smile on the face of God. The promise here is that your sacrifice of love is indeed pleasing to God.

God is pleased when you give financially to a brother in need. God is pleased when you help a sister in need. God is pleased when your life is characterized by "doing good and sharing." These are the New Covenant sacrifices that we have to offer.

Well, let's move on to my third point.

3. Obey (verse 17)

Hebrews 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

I trust that you can see the commands in this verse. They come right at the beginning, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." These two commands are essentially synonyms. They both express an obedience to the leaders in the church. God has given elders and deacons to the church. Elders to shepherd the church. Deacons to serve the church. But, men in both positions are to be obeyed.

Now, this is a hard thing to preach on. I wish someone else were here to tell you to obey the leaders of the church. Because, for me to do so might easily come across as self-serving. It may come across as me pulling authority for my own good. "Submit to me." As if it's all about me.

Well, let me tell you my heart. I want to so love you and so serve you and so spend time with you that you would desire to submit to me. Also, I want for my fellow elders, to so love you and serve you, that you would want to submit to them. I want for the deacons of this church, to so love you and serve you, that your aspiration would be to submit to them.

In this way, I want for the church to work a bit like a marriage. In a marriage, a wife is called to submit to her husband as to the Lord. And, a man is called to love his wife as Christ loved the church.

And the way that such a marriage works best is for a man to so demonstrate his love for his wife in such great degree, that she would know that any decision that he makes would not be a self-serving decision. Rather, it would be a decision in which the good of the wife is taken into account as foremost of all. Knowing that and experiencing that, the wife gladly submits to him as to the Lord. That's the Biblical call for marriage. And in some regard, it works in a church also.

When the leaders so love the congregation, and when the leaders so pour themselves out for the congregation, and when the congregation knows that and experiences that and trusts that the decisions of the leaders have the good of the congregation in mind, then submission to that authority will be willing and complete.

Can you picture it? I know that I can. I just picture the small church in Wainsgate, England in the 1700's. This church had called John Fawcett to be their pastor. He was a young man of age 26 (born in 1740), who had been converted under the ministry of George Whitefield. During his years in Wainsgate, "his salary was meager and his family was growing." He was a man of gifts and was called to pastor "the large and influential Carter's Lane Baptist Church in London to succeed the well-known Dr. Gill. ... As the day for the scheduled departure from Wainsgate arrived, with saddened parishioners gathered around the wagons, Mrs. Fawcett finally broke down and said, 'John, I cannot bear to leave. I know not how to go!' 'Neither can I,' said the saddened pastor. The order was soon given to unpack the wagons."

And there John Fawcett and his family remained. He never left the church at Wainsgate. Rather, he ministered there for 50 years, never receiving a salary more than \$200 a year. Though his church was small, "he became well-known as an outstanding preacher and scholar." He opened a school for young preachers. He wrote a number of books. He was given an honorary doctorate from Brown University in the United States. [\[1\]](#)

From his experience, he wrote the hymn, ...

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Before our Father's throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one
Our comforts and our cares.

We share each other's woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.

When such love and such affection are present in a church, submission and obedience to the leaders ought not to be a hard thing.

I've been asked before about looking for a bigger church or interviewing someplace else to be a pastor. I've said, "Why would I leave Rock Valley Bible Church? The people love me here. What else would I want in a church, than mutual love from a pastor to a body." That's my heart for all of you. You are family. I love you and want to lead you.

My heart for you is Peter's heart. He exhorted the elders of the scattered churches to "Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3).

This is a call to lead like Jesus led -- with humility, with love, with diligence, with delight. I believe that it's the way that God wants the church to function. There is a reward at the end of such a labor. Peter continues, "and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4). It's the reward of being a faithful believer. It's the reward of being a faithful pastor, the unfading crown of glory. It's what I'm looking toward.

We see much the same thing in our text in Hebrews. Look again at verse 17, ...

Hebrews 13:17

for they (the leaders of the church) keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.

Here we have the function of the leaders of the church. They are to watch over souls. That is, they are to be vigilant. They are to keep awake. They are to be on the alert, much like a night watchman, watching and caring for the souls of people.

I'll just give you the testimony that the church is never off my mind. I think about you all. I pray about you all. I care about you all. Even on my day off.

I know that there will be a day when we, as leaders, will stand before God and give an account for the manner in which we shepherded the church. God will inspect the work of those who shepherded the church. And leaders will give an account. I've heard Mark Dever say something to the effect that you will never be disappointed at the judgment that your church was too small. Because, questions will come. Questions like these: As people came to worship, did you put Christ before them? As people watched you live, did you model the life of Christ in front of them? As people drifted into sin, did you pursue them and warn them? As people had conflicts, did you seek to resolve them? Those are the sorts of questions that will be asked of all spiritual leaders in that last day. That day is constantly on my mind. I know that my work will be evaluated. It drives me to serve you and love you.

But, listen, there's a way that it can go smooth for you, and it can go smooth for the leaders of this church. We see this in the last half of verse 17, "Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." A disobedient, rebellious people is discouraging for pastors. It makes it difficult for them to serve with joy. And an unhappy pastor is not good for the congregation.

These two things build upon each other. The Pastor's love fosters obedient people. Obedient people encourage the Pastor's joy. The Pastor's joy lends to the people's joy. This is like a husband loving a wife. He loves her, and she respects him.

This cycle can also be a cycle where these two things wear upon each other. The Pastor's lack of love leads to a disobedient people. Disobedient people discourage the pastor and lead to his unhappiness. An unhappy pastor can create discontent among his people. The same goes for a marriage. A lack of love from the husband leads to a lack of respect for him from his wife.

So obey your leaders and submit to them. Give them reason to serve you joyfully.

Let's turn to my last point.

4. Pray (verses 18-19)

This comes from verse 18 and 19, ...

Hebrews 13:18-19

Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner.

At this point, we get some insight into the circumstances surrounding this letter. According to the last half of verse 19, we see that the pastor and the people were separated for some reason. He wanted to be "restored" to them. He wanted to come back.

Now, we don't know why they were separated. It may have been prison. It may have been illness. It may have been political pressure. It may have been the burdens of ministry elsewhere. It may have been something else that we don't know. Somehow, they were apart and wanted to be together again. But, apparently, it was out of his control, because he was seeking for prayer. He was seeking that God would change the circumstances to allow them to be together.

He believed in prayer. He believed that God would change things for the better for him through prayer.

Notice how this call to pray comes twice. It comes in verse 18, "Pray for us." And in verse 19, "I urge you all the more to do this" (i.e. to pray). The repetition brings attention to the importance of this call. And I would call all of you to the same thing. Pray. Pray for the leaders of this church. Pray for us by name.

This pastor puts forth his heart. "We are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things." Perhaps he felt the urge to say this in light of verse 17, commanding them to obey their leaders. Such a word isn't coming from ill motives, a desire for power, or self-promotion. No, it's coming from a heart to serve. And I can say the same thing. As I work at shepherding this church, "I have a good conscience." "I'm seeking to conduct myself honorably in all things." I'm not seeking to lord my authority over you. I'm not seeking glory for myself. I'm not seeking to go behind your backs. I'm seeking to be with you often and leisurely, to direct you in the ways of Christ.

I think that most of you know me well enough to know that I'm not pulling out the pastor card, calling you to obey me because of my position. My ways are to love you into submission. My conscience is clean, cleansed through the blood of Christ.

So, let's Sing (verse 15) because we are saved. Let's Serve (verse 16) because we have been served. Let's Obey (verse 17) because we have been called. And let's Pray (verses 18-19) because we are dependent. Let us offer up a Better Worship as the New Covenant calls us to do.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on July 3, 2011 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Kenneth W. Osbeck, 101 Hymn Stories, pp. 45-46.