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TRUE CHRISTIAN SACRIFICES

Hebrews 13:15-16

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March 13, 2005

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Hebrews Lesson 55

True Christian Sacrifices
Hebrews 13:15-16

Outside of God's Word, one of the most profound sentences ever written is the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What is the chief end of man?" Answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever." Or, as John Piper has modified it (rightly, I think), "Man's chief end is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever" (*Desiring God* [Multnomah Press], 10th Anniversary Expanded Edition, p. 23). In other words, the only way that you can truly glorify God is by enjoying Him. If you are a joyless, grim Christian, gritting your teeth as you endure to the end, you aren't exactly a great advertisement for how good God is!

Piper describes how reading C. S. Lewis helped him to see this truth many years ago. Piper writes (*ibid.*, p. 18),

Lewis says that as he was beginning to believe in God, a great stumbling block was the presence of demands scattered through the Psalms that he should praise God. He did not see the point in all this; besides, it seemed to picture God as craving 'for our worship like a vain woman who wants compliments.' He goes on to show why he was wrong.

(Piper continues by citing from Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms* [Harcourt, Brace and World], pp. 94-95),

But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.... The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game....

My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.

I've experienced what Lewis was talking about when I've been at a beautiful spot in God's creation, but I don't know anyone else who is there. I want to share the joy of the experience even with a total stranger by saying, "Isn't this magnificent?" The praise completes the enjoyment.

So if we want to fulfill the chief purpose for which God created us, we must live to glorify God by enjoying Him forever, so that our joy in God spills over into continual praise of God. But the Bible links the first great commandment, to love God with our total being, with the second great commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves. To move to a monastery, where we cut ourselves off from others and live in perpetual praise to God, falls short of what pleases Him. He wants us to offer our lives as continual sacrifices of praise to Him, but also not to "neglect doing good and sharing." In other words, we glorify God *both* by a life that continually spills over in praise toward God *and* by practical good deeds. Thus our text makes the point that...

Through Christ, we should offer to God sacrifices of praise and good deeds, which please Him.

The author may have been responding here (as he seems to be doing in 13:10) to an objection raised by the Jews towards these Jewish believers in Christ. In verse 10, the objection was, "We have an altar in Jerusalem, but you Christians have no altar." The author emphatically counters, "But we do have an altar, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our once-for-all offering for sin." Coupled with that objection is the one he answers in our text, "We Jews offer our sacrifices on the altar at the temple, but you have no such sacrifices in your worship."

The author counters, "True, we no longer offer animal sacrifices, because Jesus is the complete and final sacrifice for our sins. We need no other sacrifice for atonement. But we do offer sacrifices to God, not to gain forgiveness of sins, but because we possess forgiveness in Christ. Our sacrifices are thank offerings, and they are not just occasional, but continual. We offer the sacrifices

of praise and of good deeds. These sacrifices please God." Our text makes four points:

1. Everything we do in the Christian life is through Christ.

"Through Him then" is emphatic in the Greek text, and we would miss the point if we did not emphasize it. The only way that we can approach the holy God is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. If we try to offer our good works to God apart from Christ, He would view them all as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6).

Men have approached God through sacrifices since the beginning of human history. Cain brought a sacrifice from the fruit of the ground. His brother, Abel, brought of the firstlings of his flock (Gen. 4:3-4). Surely, God was not arbitrary in rejecting Cain's sacrifice and in accepting Abel's. God had made it clear when He clothed Adam and Eve with the skins of an animal that the only sacrifice acceptable to approach Him was one that involved shedding the blood of an innocent substitute. The entire Old Testament sacrificial system that was later instituted under Moses pointed ahead to God's supreme and final sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died as the substitute for all that believe in Him.

The author of Hebrews has made it abundantly clear that Jesus fulfilled in His death what the Old Testament sacrificial system could only point to. In Hebrews 10:1-4, he stated,

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

He goes on to talk about Christ doing God's will by offering Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. Then (10:10) he states, "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." In case we missed it, after mentioning again the repeated Old Testament offerings, which could never take away sins (10:11), he states of Christ, "but He, having offered

one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God" (10:12). If we still missed it, he states again (10:14), "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." Christ's one offering of Himself completed, fulfilled, and ended the Jewish sacrificial system. To offer animal sacrifices to God now is to deny the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ for our sins.

Because this point is so emphatic in Hebrews, I cannot accept the view that animal sacrifices will again be offered in the millennium, even if they are "memorials" of Christ's death. I think that the author of Hebrews would be aghast at such an idea. The only sacrifices that we now can offer are spiritual sacrifices of praise and good deeds, and these may only be offered "through Him." If you have not come to God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the substitute for your sins, you may not offer anything to God. You are under His just condemnation for your sins. You must discard all of your good deeds and all personal merit and flee to the cross.

But once you have come to faith in Christ as the substitute for your sins, you must continue to come to Christ for *everything* in the Christian life. As Paul says (Eph. 1:3), "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." John Piper puts it this way (*Future Grace* [Multnomah Publishers], pp. 105-106),

Every sinner who comes to God in Christ, with all his needs, finds God coming to him in Christ, with all his promises. When a sinful person meets the holy God *in Christ* what he hears is Yes. God, do you love me? Yes. Will you forgive me? Yes. Will you accept me? Yes. Will you help me change? Yes. Will you give me power to serve you? Yes. Will you keep me? Yes. Will you show me your glory? Yes.

All the promises of God—all the blessings of God in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3)—are Yes in Christ Jesus. Jesus is God's decisive Yes to all who believe.

So the only way that we can come to God in the first place is through faith in Christ. The only way that we can be sustained in the Christian life is through faith in Christ. *Everything* in the Christian life comes through Christ. *Everything* we do in the Christian life must be done through Christ. It is an affront to Christ's sacrifice to

think that we can come to God through any other mediator, whether the virgin Mary or the saints or some earthly priest or pope. Christ alone is our high priest. Everything is through Him!

2. Through Christ, we should offer to God continual sacrifices of praise.

Praise to God is not just a nice thing to do once in a while when you feel like it. The Psalms are filled with the command, "Praise the Lord." It's not a suggestion for something you might try when you don't have anything better to do. It's a command that is to permeate everything you do. As the author here exhorts, "Let us *continually* offer up a sacrifice of praise to God." Praise to God should be the whole tenor of our lives. We are to be so captivated and filled with the greatness and goodness and grace and majesty of God, that like a cup full to the brim, we are always spilling over in praises to Him.

True praise must come from the heart, and so the command implies and demands that our hearts are right before Him. God sees our hearts (Heb. 4:13). If in our hearts, we constantly grumble and complain about the way that God is treating us, and then we come to church, put on our happy face, and sing praises to God, we're being hypocrites. We've got to deal with our hearts before we can bring a true sacrifice of praise to God. Confess your sinful grumbling to God. Seek the satisfaction and joy that comes through faith in Christ alone. Otherwise, your praises will be hollow and not heartfelt. Your good deeds will not be acceptable to God. True praise and genuine good deeds flow from a heart that is satisfied in God and His abundant grace in Christ.

John Piper, in a sermon on this text (on the web at: <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper89/9-17-89.htm>) writes,

Priority Number One at Bethlehem [the church he pastors] is the cultivation of hearts that stand in awe of God. We believe in missions. We believe in evangelism. We believe in nurture and education. But we know that this is all a weariness of the flesh if it is not preceded and carried by a sense of wonder at the glory of God. If your heart is not amazed by the grace of God, and your mind is not gripped by the truth of God, and your sense of right and wrong is not permeated by the justice

of God, and your faith is not resting in the power of God, and your imagination is not guided by the beauty of God, and your life is not steadied by the sovereignty of God, and your hope is not filled with the glory of God, then the service of God will be what Paul calls works of the law, and not the fruit of the Spirit. Work for God that is not sustained by wonder at God is a weariness of the flesh. Priority Number One is the cultivation of hearts that stand in awe of God.

But lest you think that John Piper is the only one saying such things, Charles Spurgeon said something similar (in a sermon on this text, "A Life-long Occupation," Ages Software, p. 733):

Dear brothers and sisters, be sure that you do not lose your joy. If you ever lose the joy of religion, you will lose the power of religion. Do not be satisfied to be a miserable believer. An unhappy believer is a poor creature; but he who is resigned to being so is in a dangerous condition. Depend upon it, greater importance attaches to holy happiness than most people think. As you are happy in the Lord you will be able to praise his name. Rejoice in the Lord, that you may praise him.

George Muller knew and practiced the same thing. He often advised that "the business of every day is first of all to seek to be truly at rest and happy in God" (*George Muller of Bristol*, by A. T. Pierson [Revell], p. 257. See also, p. 315.) This is why a more recent biography of Muller is titled, *George Muller: Delighted in God* (Roger Steer, [Harold Shaw Publishers], 1975).

The author of Hebrews adds by way of clarification, "that is, the fruit of lips that confess His name" (literal translation; see Hos. 14:2). To "confess God's name" means openly to proclaim and to submit to God's attributes and gracious actions towards us in Christ. In Romans 14:11, Paul alludes to Isaiah 45:23, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to [lit., *confess*; the same Greek word as in Heb. 13:15] God." At the judgment, every tongue will openly proclaim God's holy justice and bow before His rightful sovereignty. Then, they will have no choice. But now, by God's grace, we can willingly offer a sacrifice of praise to God by bowing our hearts before Him and reveling in who He is, as revealed in His Word (*not* in "however you conceive Him to be"!).

Praise flows from a heart that has been brought into submission to God and His Word. When we see that His justice and holiness, along with His mercy and love, are upheld at the cross, where the Son of God bore the wrath that was due for our sins, we will continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to Him! When we see that God “has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim. 1:9), we cannot help but praise Him!

I’m preaching to myself as well as to you when I say, let’s work at casting off every thought of grumbling or discontent and becoming a people who are “to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph. 1:6)! As 1 Peter 2:5 tells us, “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Peter continues (1 Pet. 2:9), “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

Our text reminds us not only of the first great commandment, to express our love for God through genuine praises, but also of the second commandment, to love our neighbor as ourselves:

3. Through Christ, we should offer to God continual sacrifices of good deeds.

“Doing good” is a general term for all kinds of practical ministry to others, whereas “sharing” (Greek = *koinonia*) means sharing the essentials of life with those who lack them and are unable to work to obtain them (2 Thess. 3:10). The Bible is clear that religion that is only God-ward and does not extend in practical ways to others is phony.

James 1:27 states, “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” James goes on to say (2:15-16), “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?”

The apostle John echoes this (1 John 3:16-18), "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." Jesus taught the same thing when He said that when we feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, when we invite in the stranger and clothe the naked, when we visit those who are sick or in prison, we are really doing it to Him (Matt. 25:35-40).

The Greek imperative, "do not neglect," implies here (as it did in 13:2) that some were neglecting this duty and needed to stop doing so. Our responsibility is primarily to fellow believers, but it does not stop there. As Paul wrote (Gal. 6:10), "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." I confess that in our modern world, where we know instantly about needs around the globe, it is not easy to know how much to give and to whom to give. But we should not let that stop us from being "zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). Our text makes one last point:

4. God is pleased with our sacrifices of praise and good deeds.

"Such sacrifices" refers both to our sacrifices of praise and of good deeds. If we offered them apart from Christ, they would be a vain and offensive attempt to commend ourselves to God. But when we offer them through Christ, God is pleased with them. The aim of our lives should be to please God out of love for Him. Paul prayed for the Colossians, "so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). He also explained (2 Cor. 5:9), "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him."

We should live every day with the realization that one day we will stand before Him. We should live so that we will hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful slave... enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:23). If through Christ, we continually offer to God sacrifices of praise and good deeds, we will rejoice someday to hear those words from His lips.

Conclusion

God created you for the purpose that you would live to glorify Him *by* enjoying Him forever. How do you do that? By living in a manner pleasing to Him. How do you do that? By coming to faith in Jesus Christ and His shed blood as the only way to be reconciled to the holy God. Having trusted in Christ, you please God by daily offering your life to Him as a sacrifice of praise and good deeds.

Here are some ways to put this into practice:

(1) *Steep yourself in the Psalms.* The Book of Psalms is filled with praises to God. Turn the psalms into *your* praises as you pray them back to God.

(2) *Get a hymnal, learn, and sing the great hymns of the faith.* If you don't know the tunes, there are some wonderful recordings available.

(3) *Look for opportunities to serve, rather than expecting to be served.* "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). There are many needs in this church, as well as in our community, to do good and to share. Give regularly to our SOS fund, which is used to help the needy. The Sunshine Rescue Mission and Hope Cottages (for homeless women) are ministries that need workers and givers.

(4) *With George Muller, make it your first business of every day to find delight and joy in God.* Your chief end is to glorify Him by enjoying Him forever!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it absolutely essential to realize that you cannot come to God by your good works?
2. How can we truly praise God in the midst of severe trials? Should we praise Him even if we don't feel like it?
3. With unending needs in the world, how can we know where to direct our service and monetary gifts?
4. Why is our joy in God inseparable from glorifying Him?

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