

Final Thoughts: Part 2

Hebrews 13:15-25

June 13, 2010

We ended last week looking at Jesus as the final sacrifice, offered for our sins outside the city gates. We said that part of being His followers means accepting for ourselves the shame and disgrace He bore. That was where we finished. This week we take off of that point and move forward into some of its implications for us.

Early in this week's text we find the word, "therefore." Our text follows mostly from what we talked about last week, but also from the whole letter to the Hebrews. As we have made our way through this letter we have seen the author declare Jesus to be the greatest revelation of God and to have authority greater than angels or Moses. We have seen that, even though Jesus is greater than the high priest (indeed He is a High Priest of a completely different order), He is also the sacrifice through whom our sins are forgiven and the new sanctuary is opened. We have heard a call to persevere in this faith, to lay aside our sin, and enter the new sanctuary. We have seen many examples of people who, though not perfect, lived lives of faith and were thus counted as righteous. We have seen that our destiny is a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Because of these things we are called to continually offer God a sacrifice of **praise**. He has kept His promises to us. He has given us His presence and love in spite of our sinfulness and rebellion against Him, and He calls us out of that sin and rebellion so that we might enjoy His presence. He has given His Son, Jesus, who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin.

We often forget how horrible sin is. We are so wrapped up in it still that we try to justify ourselves, make excuses, and rationalize our way out of our guilt. That is true even in the church. What we should do, God's command, is to know the depth of our sin and depravity, feel the guilt of it, and then know that we have been washed free from that guilt and the weight it brings by the blood of Jesus. Until we look at our sin from God's perspective we will never truly understand it or be grateful enough to God for saving us from it. If we don't continually praise God it is because we aren't sufficiently sorry for our sin or aware of just how much He has done for us.

This sacrifice of praise is to be offered through **Jesus**. It is the proper response to what He did for us and the fact that, by His grace, God has made it effective in us. The Holy Spirit works in us to bring us to Jesus, and it is through Him that we come to the Father. Praise is the natural result, the fruit, of lips that confess Jesus' name—that say that Jesus, and no one and nothing else, is Lord.

Just offering praise with our lips is not enough. The work that God does in us and that elicits such praise also brings good works and generosity out of us. Thus we are commanded to remember, "to do good and to share with others." Again, we must be careful that we never think that doing good things will somehow save us. At the same time, we are saved to do good works. Good works don't save, but saved people do good for those around them and are generous with those in need. After his clear statement that we are saved only by God's grace through faith in Jesus, Paul added, "*For we are*

God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10) We are created, and we are saved, to do more than just sit around enjoying ourselves. Adam and Eve were made to work in the garden, to participate in God's work of creation, as we are saved to work to help restore that creation.

Besides, when we give of ourselves and our resources God is **pleased**. He likes it when we seek to fulfill the purposes for which He made us.

Next, the author addresses the relationship between the people in the church and the church's leadership—especially pastors, but it includes all who teach. It is a common belief that churches hire pastors and so the pastor should do what the members say.

The view of scripture is exactly the opposite. Scripture universally says that God places the people He wants in leadership over the churches and the churches are to follow and obey them. Pastors are chosen by God and must speak the words God gives them to speak. This is why churches call pastors, not "hire" them. The church is to recognize God's **call** on an individual to be their pastor, not seek to choose a pastor for themselves.

If the pastor is in error, the congregation should show him from God's word where he is wrong and if he will not correct his teaching or life he should be removed from office. If the pastor is not in error with regard to scripture, then the church should follow his teaching. The clear teaching is that the people in the church must, "*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.*" (v.17) To the extent that a person teaches God's word, what they say carries God's authority. Pastors, for their

part, are instructed to be careful that they do not "lord it over" the people and to use their authority in loving ways that build up the people in grace and faith instead of destroying the church.

The reason for this call to submit to the authority of the church's leadership is that the pastor and others in leadership positions must give account to God for the way they have handled God's word and the people God has placed under their leadership. It is a fearful thing to stand before God and give an account for how we have used the time He has given us on this earth. It is an even more fearful thing to stand before Him and give an account for how one has handled His word and led His people. I and the leadership of this congregation are not responsible before God for your relationship with Him. In the end, that is your responsibility, and yours alone. We are responsible, and will be held to account, for how we have preached, taught, led, encouraged, corrected, and strengthened you in that relationship. This is one reason I so strongly encourage you to participate in small groups and in Bible study. I can't do all I need to do here on Sunday morning. If I don't call you to greater knowledge of God, faith in Him, and obedience to Him, and teach you in these things, then woe to me for hindering your spiritual growth.

One last reason the author instructs the people to obey their leaders is, ". . . *so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.*" (v.17) Those who teach and preach God's word for God's people carry the burden that the congregation is not the final audience. God will judge them by the fruit of their labor that is borne out in the congregation.

If the people submit and grow as a result then it brings great joy to the leadership. If the people fight and resist what God is trying to do in them, then the leaders get frustrated and it can even take their focus off of what they need to be doing. My greatest joy is to have members of this congregation show me how their relationships with God are improving and tell me what they are learning. Seeing you depend on God in times of trouble heartens me that my time and breath are not wasted. It frees me to move ahead into deeper and greater things which benefit all of us instead of staying stuck in one place rehearsing the same thing over and over.

Having called on the people to obey their leaders and submit to their God-given authority, the author now asks them to pray for him. Certain that he has done well and lived with a clear conscience, the author asks the church to pray that he might be restored to them. He is hoping to visit them and see them face to face.

Likewise, we ought to **pray** for each other. We need to pray that we will each have clear consciences and desire to live honorably in every way. Our consciences should be clear because we are without sin, and the sins we do commit have been confessed and the Holy Spirit is doing His work of rooting them out of our hearts. This is not a call to sear our consciences so that they no longer function, but to holy lives. Prayer, time spent with God, provides the fuel and strength we need for this. We cannot do it on our own, even with each others help. That just leads to legalism and frustration. We need the work of the Spirit deep in our hearts and we need each other to help that work along.

Having asked for prayer the author now adds a benediction as he wraps things up. *“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”* (vv.20,21) This benediction, good words, is a blessing and a statement of **hope**. As with all good things, it is rooted in God. The author calls Him, “the God of peace.” Even as God’s wrath awaits all who refuse Him, He is at heart a God of peace who is willing to pay the penalty for the sin of His rebellious creation. In the shed blood and death of Jesus He has established an eternal covenant. We saw that earlier in the letter. Here, we are reminded that it was through that covenant that God raised Jesus from the dead.

This same Jesus is the Great Shepherd who seeks to lead His people to peace with God and each other. He feeds them on His word and waters them with His Holy Spirit. In doing these things through Jesus, the Father seeks to equip His people with everything they need to do His will. He also works in us what it pleasing to Him.

Note this is all about **God**. He does not give us what we need to do what we want, only to do His will. He does not work in us what is pleasing to us, indeed what He works may be rather painful for us, but He works what pleases Himself. Yet we have His promise that, though we may suffer for a time the end result will far surpass any pain or discomfort we have here if we

will submit to His will and cooperate with His work in us.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, expressed the same understanding, though he went into more detail about what pleases God. Speaking of Jesus, Paul wrote, *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”* (Ephesians 4:11-13) What **pleases** the Father is to bring us into maturity in our faith so our characters look like Jesus. One of the first signs this is happening is we will reach unity in faith and unity in our knowledge of Jesus, and that happens as we learn and serve together. It is God’s goal to give us everything we need and to do his work in us, through worship, prayer, Bible study, and service to each other and the community.

Finally, saying he has written only a short letter, the author asks his readers, us, to bear with this word of exhortation–encouragement and instruction–which he has written. He wants us to keep it in mind. He expects us to follow it and learn from it. His desire is that we put it to good use.

With this we have come to the end of the letter to the Hebrews. The final words, *“Grace be with you all,”* (v.25) are a fitting end to this message of God’s grace offered to us in Christ Jesus. It is the thrust of life in Christ and we can celebrate and praise God for His kindness and mercy toward us.