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Hebrews #45

How Pilgrims Sing and Serve Hebrews 13:14-16

I want to dispense today with any prolonged introduction and jump right into the deep end of the pool. In Hebrews 13:14 our author says that Christians, and I assume that means you who are in attendance here today, are people who know and believe in the depths of your heart that “*here*” on this present earth, in its present form, “*we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come*” (Heb. 13:14).

He’s not saying that we should despise Oklahoma City or whatever city you call home. He’s not suggesting that we treat it with contempt or even benign neglect. He’s not saying that we shouldn’t work and pray for its improvement. Of course we should. Rather, he’s saying that any and all earthly cities are *temporary*. They won’t last forever. *He’s saying that we shouldn’t become so attached to our current earthly home and the comforts and blessings that it brings us that we live in constant fear of losing it all. He’s saying that we shouldn’t become so dependent on what this current city can give us that we become greedy and self-absorbed and indifferent to the needs of others.*

He’s saying that whatever possessions or property we own in this city or whatever importance we place upon it should all be held loosely, in an open hand, as it were. He’s saying that our values and the way we relate to people and the way we use our money and resources should reflect the fact that we know another city is coming, a city that will last forever, a city in which we will dwell with God in unbroken bliss and fellowship and joy forever and ever. He’s talking, of course, about the New or Heavenly Jerusalem that will come when God renews this present earth and rids it of all corruption and sin and pollution and evil.

So, listen again to the words of Hebrews 13:14 – “*For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*”

OK, I think we’re all in agreement that neither Oklahoma City nor New York City, or any other city on the face of the earth, is permanent. But what does the second half of the verse mean? What does it mean for us to “seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14b)? I think it means that our hope is not invested in what we can gain now in this present city on this present earth. *It*

means that we consciously seek to have our beliefs reconfigured in conformity with the principles and values and truths that will be found in that eternal city that is yet to come.

You see, it's one thing for you to read v. 14 or listen to me recite it aloud. It's something else altogether for you actually to make ***adjustments in how you live*** because you believe it to be true. Most people who think of themselves as religious or perhaps even as Christians know what v. 14 is saying, but are unaffected by it when it comes to changing their beliefs and values and what they cling to or conversely hold loosely in an open hand. So do you believe v. 14? Really? If so, ***what difference does it make in decisions you make each day. What difference does it make in what matters most to you and what you are willing or unwilling to sacrifice?*** If you and I are genuinely seeking the city that is to come, how does that affect our use of money and time and energy and what we do to win and retain the respect of others?

I may be mistaken, but I don't think I am. I seriously doubt if there is anyone here today, myself included, who has been approached by a friend or family member or co-worker or neighbor who then said: "You know, I've been watching you. I've been listening to how you talk. I've carefully observed how you interact with other people, especially those who treat you like dirt. I've watched how you spend your money and what you do with your time. I've eavesdropped on your interactions with your spouse and your kids. And I've finally figured it out. You believe Hebrews 13:14, don't you?"

Am I wrong, or is there anyone here today who has experienced that? I'll believe you if you say yes, but I'm not going to hold my breath waiting for you to raise your hand.

Putting Hebrews 13:14 in Context

A couple of weeks ago we looked closely at Hebrews 13:8, a verse that declares Jesus to be the same yesterday, today, and forever. I pointed out to you that although it appears v. 8 hangs suspended in mid-air, independent of what went before it and what follows, v. 8 is in fact related quite closely to the exhortation in v. 6 and the exhortation in v. 9.

Much the same is true once again in our passage for today. You may think that what our author says in v. 14 is a stand-alone theological declaration that has no connection to what precedes it or follows it, but you'd be terribly wrong. Last week we were exhorted by our author, in effect, to take up our cross and follow Jesus. He called upon us to die to this world and to follow Jesus outside the comfort zone and embrace the suffering and reproach and shame that he endured. We read it in v. 13 – "Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured."

And why should we even give that a second thought? Why should we be willing to identify with Jesus in his suffering and rejection by this world? The answer is in v. 14 . . . it is ***because*** “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” If your identity as a human being, if your value and worth as a human being, is inextricably tied up with this city and what you can achieve *in* it and what you can own *of* it, I doubt if you will find anything persuasive or appealing in the call in v. 13 to go outside the city or outside the comfort and convenience this world offers and take up the shame and reproach of Christ. But if your hope and vision and faith and personal value and purpose in life are fixed on the city that is to come, v. 13 makes perfectly good sense.

But v. 14 isn’t merely related to what came before. It is also the ground or reason for what we read in the two verses that follow. Did you see that word in v. 15 translated ***“then”***? We could more readily translate it “therefore”. In other words, in some way the fact that we have no lasting city on this present earth but are looking for the New Jerusalem to come is connected to why and how we worship God. ***It is “because” our hopes and dreams are riveted on the coming of that glorious new city on the New Earth that we should “continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15).***

So let me bring this all together. ***Verses 15-16 are all about worship: why we do it, how we do it, when we do it, to whom we do it, and the variety of different ways in which it expresses itself in our relationship not only with God but with other people.***

I entitled this message, ***How Pilgrims Sing and Serve***. We know who the “pilgrims” are in this: you and me. All of us who are followers of Jesus. We are pilgrims because we are only temporarily passing through this present earthly city on our way to the city that is yet to come. As pilgrims, ***we are told in v. 15 how we should “sing” and in v. 16 how we should “serve”***. So, how, then, do pilgrims sing and serve?

How Pilgrims Sing (v. 15)

There can be no mistake but that v. 15 is talking about what we call “worship”. But worship or the “sacrifice of praise to God” (v. 15) is not simply singing. It is our lives in their totality: all we do, say, and think, must be for the praise of God. Praying is worship. Preaching is worship. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper is worship. Baptism is worship. Our fellowship with one another is an expression of worship. But I want to focus today particularly on ***worship as singing***.

So what is worship? Here’s my definition or description:

“Worship begins with deep, biblical thoughts about God, robust and expansive truths about who he is and his greatness and glory, thoughts that in turn awaken passionate affections for God such as joy and gladness and delight and gratitude and admiration and love and fear and zeal and deep satisfaction in all that God is for us in Jesus. These in turn find expression in all of life, whether in singing or speaking or acting or the decisions we make or the way we live life in general.”

Or again,

“Worship happens when the *mind* is gripped with the revelation of great truths about God and the heart and *affections* are set on fire with joy and satisfaction and gratitude and gladness and admiration and the *mouth* explodes in songs of praise and proclamations of the incomparable greatness of God.”

Thus we see that worship begins with intensely profound and inspiring and exalted thoughts about who God is. Worship begins in the mind. It starts with biblically accurate truths about God. Anything that passes itself off as worship that is not based on the biblical revelation of what God is truly like is nothing less than idolatry.

But worship that truly honors God *must never stop with big ideas* that fill our minds about who God is. These ideas must in turn stoke the fires of our soul with heart-felt affections for God; good theology must stir our feelings and ignite our passions and intensify our experience of love and joy and awestruck wonder and brokenness for sin and longing for God and gratitude for what he’s done and hope in what he has promised. Truth is designed to take our breath away.

These truths that fill our minds and then inflame our affections often are then expressed physically and externally in a variety of ways: singing, shouting, kneeling, bowing, lying prostrate on the ground, raising of our hands, weeping, dancing, and trembling. Or perhaps it is expressed in our observance of the Lord’s Supper or in water baptism or in public prayers or in the giving of our money or in reading of Scripture or in serving those in need or in generously giving to them financially.

That is worship. That is at least in part what he means by the words “sacrifice of praise to God.”

Let’s be clear about one thing. To talk of worship or “sacrifice” or to speak of “doing” anything for the glory of God will always feel like a burdensome weight, an oppressive obligation, even like law, *if your heart is not first captivated and enthralled with the beauty and majesty of his glory*. If I say to you, “Bridgeway, live for the glory of God,” your instinctive response might be

to say: “Ugh. That doesn’t sound like much fun. I don’t even know what God’s glory is. It just feels like Sam has put another brick into this moral backpack of heaviness that I carry about constantly. I’m bone tired of it.”

But if I first say, “Let me put on display for you the majesty of God’s glory; let me paint a portrait of God’s beauty and splendor and pray with you and for you that the Spirit would give you eyes to see it and a heart to relish and rejoice in it,” then perhaps the call to live for that glory might strike in you an altogether different chord.

The fact is that until you are stunned by God’s grace and left breathless at his power and overcome by his beauty and enthralled with his knowledge and fascinated by his self-sufficiency and in awe of his love for broken and hell-deserving sinners like you and me, you will never respond to the call to offer up a sacrifice to him as anything other than a religious obligation to be fulfilled or a moral duty to discharge. You must first know God and see God and be ravished by his beauty before you will delight in the service and praise of God. Until such time as your mind is gripped by the sovereignty of God and your imagination is electrified by the truth of God you will hear the words of Hebrews 13 as oppressive and onerous.

As John Piper once said, “work for God that is not sustained by wonder at God is a weariness of the flesh.” I hope and pray that as we’ve worked our way verse by verse through Hebrews you’ve encountered the beauty of our God. My aim not only today but always will be to lay before your eyes the grandeur of God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. If you don’t see and savor his grandeur, any talk of a “sacrifice of praise” will ring hollow in your heart.

So let’s slow down a bit and unpack this passage.

“Through him”

What does it mean that all our praise is “through” Christ? Well, consider what we’ve learned in Hebrews. It is through him that we have access to the Father. It is through him that an offering for our sins has been made. It is through him that we have been forgiven. It is through him that Satan has been defeated. It is through him that all we cherish as of utmost value is now ours. You will never be able to happily and joyfully and passionately praise God if you continue to believe that he’s angry with you, that he’s disillusioned with you, and that you come into his presence only by a grudging concession on his part. If you feel God is against you rather than for you, will you offer a sincere sacrifice of praise? Probably not. And it is only “through” Christ that we know God is genuinely for us and that he smiles on us rather than frowns. Or, as Piper has put it:

“Christ is the asbestos righteousness that wraps us up in love so we can enjoy the blazing brightness of God's holiness and not be consumed by it” (John Piper).

“Continually”

This word “continually” does not mean that we should be singing every minute of every day! But I hardly think any of us is close to being guilty of that anyway. It does mean that worship and adoration and proclamation of God’s greatness should in some way be interlaced in all that we do. A heart that is enthralled with God and makes it known should weave itself into everything: our jobs, our hobbies, our families, our community group gatherings, our time in the car, our time with our kids, etc.

Having said that, it does also mean that ***Sunday corporate gatherings*** are not optional. They are essential to our obedience to this command, in that it is in our gathered meetings as the entire body of Christ that we especially are to sing and speak and make known our praises to him. Everything we do on a Sunday is a sacrifice of praise to God: my preaching, your praying, singing, greeting one another, observance of the Lord’s Table, baptism, etc.

I think this word also points to our ***circumstances***: both good and bad, both painful and prosperous, both in seasons of joy and sadness, during the experience of both depression and elation, both perplexity, when we understand nothing, and clarity when we see things clearly; in times of weeping and rejoicing, suffering and ease.

“Sacrifice of Praise”

We’ve heard a lot about “sacrifices” in Hebrews: the blood of bulls and goats and lambs offered up as a sacrifice on the altar of the old covenant, first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. But we’ve also heard that Jesus came as the fulfillment of all such sacrifices and that by his offering up of himself to suffer for our sins he has fully and finally satisfied the wrath of God against us and secured our eternal forgiveness.

Thus ***with the coming of Jesus the meaning of “sacrifice” has changed***. It’s no longer a goat or a turtle-dove or a grain offering but ***an entire life devoted to the glory and praise of God***. We give our all that God might be seen as beautiful and worthy. Our praise of him is designed to awaken the world to him as the preeminent treasure in the universe.

So we must remember that the fact that the sacrifices of the Mosaic Covenant are no longer required of Christians under the New Covenant does not mean we have nothing to bring as a sacrifice to God. But the important difference between our sacrifices under the New Covenant and those of the Old Covenant is that we do not come to God in order to obtain forgiveness of sins but because they have already been fully and finally forgiven through Christ. Furthermore, our sacrifices are not bloody, but spiritual. And they are not to be limited to specified days of the year in accordance with feasts and other rituals but are to be continual and daily, to be offered at all times.

And here our author has in mind one particular kind of sacrifice of praise: ***verbal proclamation in song*** of the greatness and glory of God's name.

“the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name”

The reference to the “fruit of lips” in v. 15 must be contrasted with what Jesus said when he denounced the hypocritical and vain worship of the Pharisees – “This people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me” (Matt. 15:8). Needless to say, that is not what our author means when he talks about praising God with our “lips”. There is a world of difference between the labor of your lips and the “fruit” of your lips. The “fruit” of lips is what we say or sing that flows from a heart mesmerized by the mercy of God, a spirit that is saturated with the splendor of God, and affections set on fire by the magnificence of God.

Just think of it: according to Jesus you can “worship” God by singing and shouting and dancing and loud declarations of loyalty and love and it all be vanity! ***If the “heart” is not engaged, worship is a sham.*** You can be orthodox and honored among men, as the religious leaders in that day certainly were, fervent and faithful in your vocalized praise of God, quite “pious” by all outward indications, at the same time your “heart” is distant and cold and lifeless.

It's important to note that he does refer to the “lips” and not just to our hearts or affections. In other words, God wants us to “sing” and “speak” and “shout” his praises. This is what Paul had in mind in Colossians 3:16 –

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

Although one can surely worship without singing, we can't ignore the emphasis in Scripture on this expression of praise and joy in God. The singing of our praise is everywhere in Scripture

(see, for example, Exodus 15:1,20-21; Judges 5:2-5; 1 Chronicles 16:9; Psalm 47:6-7; 66:2,4; 69:30-31; 96:1-2; 105:2; 1 Corinthians 14:15; James 5:13). No fewer than **85x** in the Old Testament alone God's people are exhorted to sing their praises to God.

But why singing? Why not just speak your praise to God? In my book, *The Singing God*, I tried to answer this question as follows:

“Singing enables the soul to express deeply felt emotions that mere speaking cannot. Singing channels our spiritual energy in a way that nothing else can. Singing evokes an intensity of mind and spirit. It opens the door to ideas, feelings, and affections that otherwise might have remained forever imprisoned in the depths of one's heart.

Singing gives focus and clarity to what words alone often make fuzzy. It lifts our hearts to new heights of contemplation. It stirs our hope to unprecedented levels of expectancy and delight. *Singing sensitizes*. It softens the soul to hear God's voice and quickens the will to obey.

I can only speak for myself, but when I'm happy I sing. When my joy increases it cries for an outlet. So I sing. When I'm touched with a renewed sense of forgiveness, I sing. When God's grace shines yet again on my darkened path, I sing. When I'm lonely and long for the intimacy of God's presence, I sing. When I need respite from the chaos of a world run amok, I sing.

Nothing else can do for me what music does. It bathes otherwise arid ideas in refreshing waters. It empowers my wandering mind to concentrate with energetic intensity. It stirs my heart to tell the Lord just how much I love Him, again and again and again, without the slightest tinge of repetitive boredom” (22).

Note also that the singing that both Paul and our author in Hebrews 13 have in mind is neither random nor aimless. It is **“to God”** (Heb. 13:15)! He is the focus of our faith, the object of our praise, the audience of One to whom we lift our hearts in wonder and awe. I suspect this is one reason certain people are uncomfortable with singing. It requires of them vulnerability, openness, and honesty as they direct their most heartfelt adoration, hopes, and desires “to God.” They are fearful of the depth of commitment and devotion that singing “to God” entails. But sing “to God” we must.

“My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God!”

(Ps. 84:2b)

How Pilgrims Serve (v. 16)

Don't overlook that God-pleasing praise is not merely one of singing but also of serving. ***The sacrifice of praise is more than a song. It's also rigorous work, heart-felt generosity, and true compassion for those who are hurting and in need.*** God loves to see that as much as he loves to hear the other. We see this clearly in v. 16 where the doing of good and the sharing of our possessions is also referred to as a "sacrifice" of praise to God.

The point is that you can't worship God in a way that pleases him if you continue to greedily clutch your money and time and turn your back on the needs that exist in the body of Christ.

But how is it that doing "good" and in particular being generous with our money is an act of worship? Worship is obviously all about making God look good. ***The sacrifice of praise is designed to make known the preeminent value of God.*** We worship in order to magnify him as our greatest and most highly prized treasure. So how does financial generosity do that?

Is it not obvious? When you make generous and sacrificial use of your wealth to help others you are declaring that your treasure is in heaven, not on earth. To do good to those in need and to give abundantly to the work of Christ in and through the church shows that you are living not for this world or this city but for the city and the world that is to come. It is your way of saying that your greatest joy isn't in what your money can purchase for you in this present "city" but in what it can do to promote the glory of God in that "city" that is to come. To obey v. 16 proves the truth of v. 14 has actually made a difference in your life.

When we live and give sacrificially for Christ's sake we make him look more valuable than things. Think again about v. 14. This is not just a statement of theological truth. ***It is a revelation of the orientation of your heart.*** If your heart is set on seeking the city that is to come, you are set free from bondage to material wealth and you will gladly give generously as yet another act of praise to God. To be stingy with your time, energy, or money is definitive proof that you have no idea what v. 14 is all about!

When our hearts are supremely satisfied in God, they won't look for satisfaction in the stuff of the cities of this present world. When we set our hearts on the Creator rather than the creation, when we trust in all that God is for us in Jesus rather than in what worldly comfort and opulence can supply, we honor him, we magnify him, we declare that he and he alone is of supreme worth and value.

The point then is that when our hearts are abundantly full of the presence of Christ and the pleasures that he imparts they will overflow in the sacrifice of praise, lips that proclaim his beauty and his transcendent superiority to anything we might own or enjoy in this city. And that verbal praise will not terminate with itself but will stir our hands to work for the good of others and to give to alleviate their suffering.

So ask yourself this question: ***“Does the way I live show that Jesus is more precious to me than possessions? Does the use of my time, energy, and money show that my heart is set not on this present city but the one that is to come?”***

What are some of the “good” things he has in mind? Well, he’s actually already told us earlier in Hebrews 13. Back in vv. 1-3 he talked about acts of hospitality and brotherly love and ministering to those who have suffered for the cause of Christ. Sometimes that requires the commitment of our finances.

And all of this, he says, is eminently ***“pleasing to God”*** (v. 16b). Why? Because it magnifies the worth of his Son, Jesus Christ and is a blessing to the very people for whom he suffered reproach and shame and death outside the camp.

There’s another reason it’s pleasing to God. Back in Hebrews 13:5 we were exhorted to keep our lives free from the love of money and to be content with what we have because God has promised always to be with us and never to leave or forsake us. If you love yourself and your money inordinately you will find every excuse possible not to obey v. 16. If you love money you will trust *it* to bring you happiness rather than the presence of God. If you love money you will cherish it and strive to obtain all this present “city” can provide instead of seeking the spiritual treasures of the city that is to come.

And the way you keep your life free from the love of money is by trusting God’s promise that he will never leave you or forsake you. ***Therefore, every time you offer up the sacrifice of doing good and sharing your wealth you make it clear to all concerned that you aren’t dependent on money for your happiness but on God and all that is for you in Jesus and all that he has promised to provide for you in the city that is to come.***