

The Church and Its Acceptable Worship

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would like to take the Bible in front of you and open to the reading Martin read to us, Hebrews the end of 12 and the beginning of 13 on page 1009.

And if you are very clever and don't have something in your hand like a baby or a coffee cup or an iPhone or a cigarette or a cigar, you can also turn to John chapter 4 and have your hand there.

We're going to take a quick reference over there in just a moment. By the way, did you notice that the choir sang that part of our desire is that we will be as lusty as eagles?

Did anyone hear that? Where's Terry? That's right, isn't it? I haven't preached on that passage, but certainly an attractive option, I think.

Well, a hundred of us yesterday met together and studied this lengthy passage, Hebrews 13, with the last two verses of chapter 12, which belong to the passage.

[1 : 09] You know, chapter divisions, they're not really part of the Bible. And we came to the conclusion, they came to the conclusion, the passage is about worship that pleases God, acceptable worship, which I was very grateful for because I'd already written the sermon and come to the same conclusion.

But there's a surprise here. Because Hebrews 13 contradicts the widest and most deeply held assumptions about what worship is in contemporary Christianity.

I'm not talking about worship wars, you know, whether you use an indie rock band or an organ or whether you sing contemporary or classical.

I'm talking about what worship is. And I think every book I've read in the last, it's been written in the last 20 years, and every sermon I've heard certainly in the last 10, 15 years, has taught and assumed that worship is what we do here on Sunday mornings.

This is the reason we meet together. Any discussion you have, this is the assumption. So most churches call their gathering on Sunday mornings, Sunday worship. And signs outside churches and ads in papers say Sunday worship, 9am, 11am, etc.

[2 : 28] And certainly what we've communicated with our culture, ask the average person on the street why people go to church or what they're doing in church, it's worship. And even our modern dictionaries define worship as rites and ceremonies in a formal setting honouring a deity.

There's only one thing worse, and that is, I probably shouldn't say this, but when the band leader gets up in the middle of the service and says, let's begin worship, and calls their bracket of songs worship as though the rest of what we're doing is not.

But you see, the one thing that binds all these things together is that they overlook the radical difference that Jesus makes. I think they have not included and taken account of Jesus' death, resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Because his death and resurrection and the coming of the Spirit radically changes not just how we do things, it changes what worship is, the very nature of worship.

And I want to just spend a minute or two on this before we have a look at the passage. See, in the Old Testament, worship was given by God. It was a set system, a formal system of rituals and sacrifices and ceremonies by which God's people would have fellowship with him.

[3 : 49] And all the rites and ceremonies take up a great space in the Old Testament, much of Exodus, much of Deuteronomy, the entire book of Leviticus, which we haven't preached through yet.

I'd really like to, though. And all of this is so that God would have fellowship with his people. And Old Testament worship was carried out at a particular place, sanctuary, where God would choose. At a particular time, there were particular rituals, sacrifices and offerings, and they had to be offered by particular people, priests, the tribe of Levi. And you know what happened if you offered sacrifices

and offerings not according to God's commandments?

You died. That's in Leviticus. And if you didn't perform them, if the priests didn't perform them, same result. And if they weren't done in God's place according to God's command, same result.

These were God's gift to his people. But here's the point for us. All the language about worship and sacrifice and offering and altars and liturgy were tied to a narrow band of specific actions, which had a specific purpose.

[5 : 06] It was approaching the Holy God. But the coming of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection, ascension, radically changes that. In fact, I think the best way to think of it is it turns it inside out.

Think about it this way. It's very simple in a way. When Jesus comes, he comes as God in the flesh. Where is God's dwelling place? It is no longer in a place like the sanctuary or the temple.

It's now in the body, in the person of Jesus Christ. At the end of his life, he offers himself, as the Bible says, as the one true sacrifice. He is the one true priest, unrepeatable.

Jesus even speaks about this. So if you would like to, turn back to John 4. Those of you who have hands free. These are very familiar words.

John 4, verse 21. Jesus is speaking to a woman from Samaria. And the Samaritans believed, yes, you had to do worship in a particular place, but they disagreed with the Jews about the place.

[6 : 12] They said Mount Gerizim, the Jews said Jerusalem. Listen to what Jesus says, verse 21. Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain, he's near Gerizim, nor in Jerusalem, will you worship the Father.

You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

The Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit, in truth. Very interesting, isn't it?

Jesus says worship is separated now from rituals and sacrifices and priests and place. The Father, God the Father, is seeking an entirely different kind of worship.

So when Jesus dies and is raised from the dead and ascends into heaven and he sends the Holy Spirit, where is the place of God's dwelling now?

[7 : 17] We've looked at this already, haven't we? It's in the church. It's the people of God where God dwells. We become the holy sanctuary, the dwelling place of God.

And now there is a complete transformation in what worship is. So the language of worship and liturgy and sacrifice and sanctuary and altar in the New Testament is transferred over into Christian living.

It's more about what we do when we leave the gathering than what we do when we gather. The New Testament never uses the language of worship to describe what we do when we gather.

Isn't that interesting? So priests, liturgy, place, it's spread now through all our lives. And worship is now presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice to God through the week.

It is not being conformed to this world, but being transformed by the renewal of our minds into the image of God. And this is what chapter 13 in Hebrews is about.

[8 : 23] And it asks and answers the question, what is worship that pleases God? And you can see, if you go back to that passage, the passage is kind of a worship sandwich.

So if you go to the end of the passage, verse 15, 16, through him, through Jesus, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.

That is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. And then right at the start, 1228, you see the same sort of language reflected.

Therefore, he says, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. And thus, let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

Because God has promised that one day he'll take the physical universe and he'll shake it to pieces. And the only thing that lasts are those things that belong to the unshakable kingdom, the kingdom of Jesus Christ, his son.

[9 : 32] Therefore, let us offer to God acceptable worship. Literally, worship that pleases God. Worship that makes God happy. And between these two references to worship and sacrifice, the writer tells us what true Christian worship is.

And you'll see it contradicts our usual narrow view of worship of what we do on Sundays. It widens it out, it broadens it out. There are two sections. And there are two things that the writer says worship is.

The first thing he says is that worship that pleases God is serving the people of God. Verses 1 to 6. Cast your eyes down those verses.

If we want to worship in a way that pleases God, that means a lifelong interest, a lifelong care, a lifelong ambition to serve the people of God. You can see it speaks about brotherly love and not neglecting our hospitality to strangers and compassion for those who are suffering and sexual fidelity and generosity instead of greed.

That's what the New Testament says is God-pleasing worship. Is that what you mean when you use the word worship? The Christians who received this letter, they'd begun well, but they're in danger of sliding, slipping back into the world.

[10:58] Some of their members had already begun to slip back into the world. And the writer says, let brotherly love continue. He says it because it's hard. And what does it mean to let brotherly love continue?

Well, he's already told us back in chapter 10, if you flick back one page in verse 24. Let us, 10, 24, let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, some have drifted, but encourage one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Now, what that means is our gatherings, yes, they are part of our Christian worship, but it cannot be limited to that. Let brotherly love, sisterly love continue, especially when some of our brothers and sisters slip back into the world.

I mean, wouldn't it be much easier just to give it over for a little while? Just be selfish for a while. I mean, Christians can be really nasty, can't they?

Is that a shock? I'm sorry, I don't mean to shock anyone. I mean, they don't appreciate me as I deserve to be appreciated. And Christians can be downright nasty.

[12:15] The first church council meeting I had in my first church in Sydney after leaving seminary broke up in a fight, a physical brawl.

Number of men on that committee, number of women, number of men were head of parachurch organisations in the city. And you might say, well, that's in Australia, of course. They're all like that. We're so good, aren't we? We're great at complaining. We're not very good at heartfelt thanks. And this is the temptation. The temptation from the world constantly is with us. Just why bother?

And what's happened here in Hebrews and what happens around us is we begin to neglect the word of God. And what happens when we neglect the word of God is our commitment to the people of God weakens.

The bonds of fellowship become something that's not as important as a good lie-in on Sunday morning so that I can read the paper. And the world looks very attractive. The true Christian worship that pleases God is letting brotherly love continue, continue.

[13:27] It's seeing the household of God as our highest ambition. If we want to please God, if we want to worship him, it means your concern will be for the people of God first and foremost.

It will mean you will not give up on hospitality, which I think is speaking about how we use our homes, particularly with strangers, and caring for those in need. And in verses 4 and 6, you get the most direct reference to the way the world tries to pull us away from belonging to the people of God. The old, it's just nothing's new here. It's sexual temptation and greed. And both of those things are attempts to weaken our commitment to the people of God. So look at verse 4.

Let marriage be held in honour among all. Let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. This is for all of us.

It's not just for marriage or for singles. It's honoured by all. And marriage ought to be highly prized. It's God's idea. It's God's institution. It's not what we are taught to believe in our culture, a social institution that we play with.

[14:40] I noticed that wonderful actor Emma Thompson this week has suggested a new model for marriage. Have you heard this? She says that fidelity is unrealistic.

And she has come out publicly saying that she wants to refute the Bible. She says monogamy is an odd state. And her model of marriage, her model of sexuality, I just, we're not putting it forward to commend it, but her model is to have three relationships over the three stages of your life.

I guess when you're young, middle-aged and old. And I think that would be of considerable concern to her current husband, who is her second.

Worship that pleases God, you see, involves our sexuality. It's not allowing a third party of any gender into our bed. It's doing nothing that is going to violate or diminish or belittle marriage.

And I'll tell you, it also means that our sexual behavior, our sexual conduct as members of the body of Christ, it's not a private matter only.

[15:54] It had implications for our life together as a body. That's why it's here. The same is true for greed, verse 5. Keep your life free from the love of money and be content with what you have.

I think today our treasury is going to give us an update on where we are financially. But whenever... I didn't know he was going to do this today, I promise you. But whenever someone speaks to us about this, the issue is not the budget, is it?

The issue really has to do with worship that pleases God. It has to do with keeping our lives free from the love of money and growing in our contentment.

Because the love of money and sexual immorality erode commitment. If you're being tempted by these things, what they will do is they'll prevent your full participation with the people of God. They'll create discontentment both with Jesus and the people of God.

You'll begin to slide. We begin to slide. But God has said, verse 5, I'll never leave you nor forsake you. Which he said to Joshua, just as he was about to go into the land, facing tremendous pressure.

[17:03] And God also says, verse 6, sorry, through the Old Testament, the Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me? Because the temptations of sexuality and of greed play on our fears and on our loneliness.

And in the end, they are a question of our trust in God. And God has said, I'll never leave you. I'll never forsake you. And I think they're a good word to us. Because it doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian, how well taught, how well respected you are, you never reach a point beyond the temptations to give up on brotherly love and give up on hospitality.

Never reach a point beyond sexual temptation and greed. And the remedy, of course, to this pull from the world is trusting the promises of God and committing yourself to the people of God.

That is worship that pleases God. And that's the first half of the passage. God-pleasing worship is being committed to the people of God. And in verses 7 to 17 in the second half, it's not just being committed to the people of God, it's being satisfied with the Son of God.

And it's very interesting. If you just look at verse 7 and verse 17, they begin and end with calling on us to have a particular attitude toward our leaders, those who teach the Word of God.

[18:29] And remember, this is not written to the leaders. Virtually none of the New Testament is written to the leaders. It's written to congregations. It's assuming that you as congregation will take responsibility for seeing that this is true.

Verse 7, remember your leaders, those who spoke the Word of God to you. Verse 17, which I'm just going to pause on because it's one of my favorite verses. And I've always wanted to speak on it at St. John's.

Perhaps we should read this together. No, no, let me. Verse 17 says, obey your leaders and submit to them. They're very un-Canadian words, aren't they? Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account.

How do you do it? Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. So, what is your job as the congregation?

It's to make Dan and me happy. And Dan can answer questions on that later. When choosing congregation leaders, this is very important, leadership in the congregation is tied to the teaching of the Word of God.

[19:48] That is why the New Testament insists there's really only one gift that that person must have. Hopefully they have others. The New Testament insists they have to have an obvious Christian life.

They've got to be, you know, they've got to be generous, not greedy, not drunk, not have anger issues or be promiscuous. But there's only one gift the New Testament requires. It's the ability to teach the Word of God and to refute those who contradict us, contradict the Word.

That's the way Jesus comes to us. That's the way salvation is made real to us. That's the way we grow. That's how faith comes to us. That's why verse 7, 8 and 9 have a progression to them.

You see, verse 7 speaks about the leaders they had in the past, the ones who've likely died, who'd planted the church by teaching the Word of God.

Amazing. Verse 9, don't be led astray by strange teaching between them. Verse 8 is the most brilliant distillation of the Word of God, what we believe as Christians.

[20 : 52] Verse 8, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Can you think of a better summary of the Gospel? I can't. And literally it goes, Jesus Christ, yesterday and today are the same and forever.

And what did Jesus do yesterday? Well, he came for us and he died to bring us to God. He has brought us to the heavenly city. We looked at last week. He secured our life in God.

What does he do today? He loves us and he guides us and he comforts us and he gives us access to the grace and the throne of God constantly. He is with us. And what will he do forever?

He will come and take us to be with him so that we will be with him forever in the city that is to come. The Jesus you met when you first became a Christian is exactly the same.

There's no shadow of change with him. His power hasn't diminished. His love hasn't decayed. His tenderness has not grown cold. This is the thing for us.

[21 : 58] This is what true Christian worship is. It's to look at Jesus and say, you cannot improve on him. You cannot add to him. You cannot take away from him. You cannot replace him. He alone can satisfy us.

The constant temptation because of who we are is to find our satisfaction somewhere else. And I think if the first half of these verses, the temptation comes from the world drift away and the remedy is the people of God.

The temptation in the second half of this chapter is the temptation of religion. And these folk were being tempted by a mix of Judaism and Christianity because at least Judaism has a visible means of support, sacrifices and cult and temple.

That's why he says all those things don't affect the heart. It's only the grace of Jesus. Verse 9. Don't be led away by diverse and strange teachings for it's good for the heart to be strengthened by grace not by foods which don't benefit those devoted to him.

Spiritual life cannot be nourished by ceremonial food practices. The heart can't be changed by any form of ritual, ceremony, ascetic practice. Things cannot improve our access to God or change our hearts.

[23 : 14] That power belongs to Jesus and particularly in Jesus' cross his death for us. And I think that's what makes sense of verses 10, 11 and 12. These quite unusual references to the Old Testament.

What the writer is doing is he's taking the most holy ceremony from all the Old Testament and saying Jesus has made it obsolete. He takes the Day of Atonement and for those of you who are following along and reading with this the reference is in Leviticus 16 a whole chapter about the Day of Atonement and there are a number of things that happened that day but the highest the pinnacle one day a year the high priest sacrifices a bull and a goat and the high priest goes into the Holy of Holies with the blood of the bull and the goat and sprinkles it on the mercy seat.

And unlike most of the other sacrifices where the animals the bodies are consumed by the clergy the priests on this day these bodies are taken outside of the camp and they are completely incinerated.

It's the highest ritual under the Old Covenant everything was choreographed by God to demonstrate the reality of sin the desire of God to live and dwell with his people forever could only happen one day in one place by one man at one altar through one particular sacrifice.

And Jesus comes who's the same yesterday today and forever and verse 10 begins and says we have an altar we have an altar it can never be repeated we have a high priest one who has brought us into the Holy of Holies we have access nothing can take that away to God himself because the crucifixion of Jesus was the end of all sacrifices and all the Old Testament system of ritual and priestly offerings and altars and sacrifices they were ways in which God was trying to show us how big what he was going to do in Jesus is they were rehearsals they were shadows but the reality is the cross of Jesus Christ and that is why worship that pleases God is no longer tied to specific places and rituals but to the priest to Jesus Christ himself so verse 15 through him through Jesus let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God that is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name you know that is why if you get the book of common prayer which is our standard of worship it never it never uses the word sacrifice in the services except when quoting this verse altar is never

used in the book this is a table we have an altar says the book of Hebrews and the word worship is never used in our services except once at the end of the Lord's Supper in the Gloria which is the sort of way of moving us out to worship

[26 : 33] God in our week and Archbishop Cramner who wrote the preface to the book of common prayer it's a great essay it's only a couple of pages it's called On Ceremonies and it says this Christ's gospel is not a ceremonial law as much as Moses' law was but it is a religion to serve God not in a figure or shadow but in the freedom of the spirit so what is the sacrifice of praise to God whatever it is it has to be offered up continually so it can't be rituals and it can't be singing does that mean you have to go out of here and sing the whole time it's going to make going to lose you many friends I think now the second half of the verse says it's the fruit of lips that acknowledge confess his name that's right it's a life that confesses the name of Jesus both with one another and with those around you it's a life commending Christ speaking of him when the opportunity counts even though that might put you outside the camp of course it includes what we do here but it's much more verse 16 don't neglect to do good and share what you have such sacrifices are pleasing to God this is worship that pleases God and I think it's much more searching than specific rituals of course it includes gathering here

I keep saying this but it is the whole of our lives when you do an act of generosity and kindness in the name of Jesus Christ when you seek to be financially generous in the name of Christ when you bear reproach for the sake of Christ that is worship worship that pleases God is two things we learn from this chapter it's serving the people of God it's being satisfied in the son of God so let me ask the question brothers and sisters are we going to do this are we going to let brotherly love continue we're going to not neglect to show hospitality particularly towards outsiders are we going to care for those who are suffering in prison even are we going to practice purity and hold marriage in honour and practice contentment and keep our lives free from the love of money that's serving the people of God and are we going to be satisfied in the son of God remembering your leaders holding the teaching of the word of God in very high esteem imitating obeying submitting letting them do this in a way that makes them happy that's not the only reason but I just or are we going to go out after strange and new teaching are we going to go will we go to strange teaching or are we going to go outside the camp to Jesus and bear the reproach that he suffered will we do good and share because that's that can only come when we're satisfied in Christ and since Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever let us worship let us offer to God worship that pleases him with reverence and awe because our God remains a consuming fire
Amen Amen Amen Thank you Amen Amen