

Hebrews 13:1-16 PM

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[0 : 0 0] So, good evening, everyone. My name's Will Gray. I'm one of the ministers on staff here at St. John's. If you're new at St. John's or if we've just never met before, I'd love to chat after the service.

If you're just popping in, for the last few weeks in Lent, we have been reading from the books of Leviticus and Hebrews. And these books are all about how the holy, good, and perfect God draws near to us, His people, in grace, so that we can draw near to Him in faith.

In the book of Leviticus, God invites His people to draw near to Him by sacrifices, by the blood of animals whose lives were given by God to cover the sins of His people.

But as Aaron said last week, this way of drawing near to God was temporary. These sacrifices were good, they were a gift from God, but they couldn't actually take away sins.

They couldn't actually deal with the problem. They were a treatment for sin, not a cure. And Hebrews shows how this old way, this old way of drawing near to God, is fulfilled and completed in Jesus.

[1 : 1 2] So the sacrifices in the Old Testament were temporary. Jesus is eternal. The sacrifices in the Old Testament had to be offered again and again and again. But Jesus' sacrifice is once, once for all time.

The sacrifices in the Old Testament covered sins, whereas Jesus takes them away. And even with the sacrifices in the Old Testament, God's people couldn't go into the most holy place.

They couldn't actually enter into His presence. Whereas through Jesus, we're invited to boldly approach God's throne, knowing that for us it's a throne of grace.

And this is what Hebrews is all about. So we're following so far, this quick review. Leviticus shows us the holiness of God and our need for something or someone to cover our sins.

And Hebrews shows how all of this is completed and fulfilled in Jesus and in His sacrifice for us. But here's the thing.

[2 : 1 7] If you read through Leviticus front to back, and that would be a great thing to do. It takes about two hours. If you read through it front to back, you'll see that most of Leviticus isn't actually about bloody sacrifices or offerings for sin.

If you read it, most of the book is about really everyday things. Things like business, money, sex, property, sickness, clothing, food, justice.

Right? At times it actually feels really tedious, almost. Like it's a little bit of overkill on God's part. But this is revealing something really important. Which is that God, the holy God who draws near to His people in grace, cares about the whole life of His people.

Right? He's not just concerned with the things that we think of as religion or worship or spirituality. He is concerned with our whole life together. Right?

Every part of it. And this is so important. If the holy God has drawn near to us in grace, and He's dwelling among us, then our life together, the life of God's people, needs to be holy as well.

[3 : 33] That's what Leviticus is about. And we see this right at the beginning of our reading from Leviticus 19. We see the Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy.

For I, the Lord your God, am holy. And in Leviticus 19, this looks like leaving grain for the poor and refugees.

Dealing honestly with one another. Paying your employees fairly. Administering justice impartially. And forgiving one another. In other words, it's all summed up at the end.

It's about loving your neighbor as yourself. It's actually where Jesus got it from. Leviticus 19. So, what we see here is that God's desire is not just to be with His people, or even just to forgive our sins, but to actually transform us.

To actually change our life together, so that we are like Him. In love and holiness. The holy God wants to make us into a holy people.

[4 : 43] And this is a good thing. This is also what Hebrews 13 is all about. And this is where we'll camp out for the rest of the time. So, if you want to have that open and follow along in Hebrews 13, that would be helpful.

But Hebrews 13 is all about how we offer God a life of acceptable and pleasing worship as His holy people. And I don't know if you felt this way.

At first glance, when we hear Hebrews 13 read, it sounds almost as though the writer was running out of time and just had to throw together some commands and greetings at the end of this letter.

Maybe you've done something like this before, writing an email at work, working on an assignment at school. Well, when I was a regent, for most of the classes, we'd have to do these reading logs or reflections.

So, it's basically like you do the weekly reading, and then you kind of do a one-page summary reflection on it, basically to show that you read it. And being the chronic procrastinator that I am, I would always leave these to the very last minute.

[5 : 48] So, I'd always be writing them kind of the hour before class started, when they were due. And so, I'd really take my time for the first couple paragraphs, right? It'd be beautifully crafted, profound insights, well-written.

And then I'd realize that I had five minutes before class started, and I would just write something for the conclusion, right? And hope that my Wi-Fi didn't crash as I was submitting it. The point being, though, this is exactly not the thing that's happening in Hebrews 13, right?

This is not what the writer of Hebrews is doing here. These aren't random or rushed commands. They actually arise out of everything that the writer has been saying up until this point about holiness and worship and the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

If you kind of flip back a page and look at the verses just before our reading, So, chapter 12, verses 28 and 29, we read, Therefore, 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.

So, right before our passage, let us offer to God acceptable worship, and then right at the end of our passage, we read these two verses. Through him, then let us offer continually a sacrifice of praise to God, and do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

[7 : 27] And the words that are translated acceptable worship and pleasing to God, those are the same words, acceptable and pleasing. So there's a kind of sandwich here. Let us offer to God acceptable worship, and let us offer to God acceptable sacrifices.

And everything we see in between, all the commands, are showing us what it actually looks like to offer worship to a holy God as his holy people.

And if you noticed, it's basically about how we live together in love as brothers and sisters in Christ. Look at verse 1 of chapter 13.

Let brotherly love continue. Literally, keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. And then he goes on to list specific ways that we do this, or should be doing this, as the church.

He says, show hospitality to strangers. Remember those who are in prison. Visit them. Identify with them. Honor marriage. Pursue sexual purity.

[8 : 32] Be free from the love of money. Be content with what you have. Remember godly leaders and imitate their faith. Stand firm in the truth of the gospel and bear criticism and even shame for associating with Christ and loving his people.

So this is what it looks like to be a holy people who worship a holy God. And there are some common themes that tie these appeals and commands together.

And we'll just consider two. We're going to consider two themes that tie these things together. The first is that they are relational. These are relational things. And second, they are costly.

They're costly. They're costly. So first, these appeals are relational. All of these appeals unpack how we keep loving one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And almost all of them touch on relationships that we have with one another. These are all, you could say, other-oriented actions. They're things that put other people first before ourselves.

[9 : 43] The stranger who needs a place to stay. The prisoner who needs encouragement and fellowship. Your spouse who needs your faithfulness. The poor who need your contentment.

And your neighbor at church who needs your steadfast faith. If we think of our relationship with God as a vertical line and our relationships with one another as a horizontal line, holiness moves in both directions.

Holiness is a gift that we receive from God which is meant to be expressed in how we relate to one another. Now, personal holiness is important.

God cares about our inner life, our thoughts, our desires, the way we live when no one else is watching, the praise that we offer to Him from our own lives.

That's personal holiness and it's important, it's crucial. But, I would go so far as to say there's no such thing as individual holiness in the Bible.

[10 : 49] There's no sense that we can become holy as God is holy without a community of people who we are called to serve and love and give our lives to.

So, holiness is vertical. It's about how we live our lives in the presence and sight of God and holiness is horizontal. It's about how we give our lives to one another in love.

And that's just one reason why there's no such thing as a solitary Christian. Holiness isn't some vague, intangible thing. It's not about withdrawing from our obligations to other people to pursue some kind of higher form of spirituality.

When we become children of God in Jesus, we receive a new family. It's the church. You are the family of God, all of us here today. And this family, these people that you're sitting beside this evening, is where we grow in holiness as God teaches us to love and serve one another as Jesus has loved and served us.

So, first, holiness is relational. And second, holiness is costly. I wonder, as Aaron was reading, if you wondered what all that stuff in the middle of our reading was all about.

[12 : 17] all that stuff about the sacrifices that are burned outside the camp and Jesus being taken outside the gate, suffering to sanctify us. I admit, it seems a bit odd, especially coming after all these commands about everyday life.

I think what's going on here is the pastor who's writing this letter to this church is wanting to be really honest with them about the cost of living as God's holy people.

most scholars think this letter to the Hebrews was written to a church that was tempted to go back to the old way of doing things.

They were tempted to go back to the old system of sacrifice and temple and synagogue and all that instead of sticking with Jesus. And Aaron talked about this a bit last week.

We're not totally sure why they wanted to go back to the old way of doing things, but one possible reason was that Judaism was actually a legal religion in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus and Christianity was not.

[13 : 23] Now this doesn't mean that it was all great for the Jewish people. It wasn't. They were living under Roman occupation and there were all kinds of little rebellions that would spring up, but it was to a degree socially acceptable to be Jewish in the Roman world.

And if they paid their taxes and kept their peace, they were usually left alone to do their own thing. And this wasn't the case for Christianity. Christianity wasn't made legal in Rome until much later, the fourth century.

So identifying yourself with Jesus and with other Christians had real consequences. You could be arrested, imprisoned, even killed. It's probably why the writer to Hebrews talks about visiting your brothers and sisters who were in prison.

There were likely people in that community who had been imprisoned for their faith. And at the very least, identifying yourself as Christian would have put you on the margins, kind of the outskirts of Roman society.

But instead of going back to the old, more respectable, possibly safer way of doing things, the writer of Hebrews urges this church to actually embrace the shame of following Christ.

[14 : 42] He says, Jesus didn't die an honorable death in the sight of the world. He didn't go off in some blaze of glory. He was taken outside the gate, outside the city.

He died a death that was shameful in the eyes of the world. And so the writer of Hebrews isn't really concerned with helping the church to find a way to kind of blend seamlessly into the culture that they were a part of.

Instead, he calls them to live in a way that was, was very countercultural and still is. I mean, it's kind of amazing actually how little some things change.

Right? I mean, look again, one more time at these appeals. Show hospitality to strangers. Identify yourself with brothers and sisters in Christ who are mistreated.

Value marriage and pursue sexual faithfulness. Free yourself from the love of money and be content with what you have. Honor and imitate good leaders and embrace shame for identifying with Christ and his people.

[15 : 50] It'd be hard to come up with a list of values that would rub up more against the Vancouver way of living, against Vancouver culture. I mean, we live in a time and place where reputation, where image is everything.

Where we pour hours and hours into carefully cultivating that of our public personas so that people will like us and accept us and see value in us. We live in a place where the unrelenting demands of career and wealth building and material prosperity leave little to no room for generous hospitality.

We live in a culture where honoring marriage and monogamy is at best viewed as repressive and outdated. And for all these reasons, it can be socially costly in our time and place to identify openly with Christ and his people.

And so we're faced with the same question as the church of Hebrews. Is it worth it? Is the cost of following Jesus and loving his people worth it?

And the whole letter of Hebrews, the whole point of the letter is to shout out, yes. Yes. It's all worth it. Over and over again, the writer to Hebrews has been saying, Jesus is better.

[17 : 18] He's better than the angels. He's better than Moses. He's better than the priests and sacrifices in the Old Testament. He's better than all the wealth and promises and glory that this world can offer.

He is our perfect priest, our perfect sacrifice, our perfect example. There's nothing behind us to go back to and there's nothing coming to look forward to that's better than Jesus.

He's it. So is there a cost? Is there a cost to following Jesus and loving his people? Yes. But in a world where wealth and power and pleasure and image are everything, there is a cost to following a crucified Savior and seeking to give our lives to love and serve others.

But is this cost worth it? Yes. Infinitely so. So, we need to try to land the plane on this passage and on this series.

So, so here it is. The core message of Hebrews is that Jesus has made the one perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

[18 : 31] Right? He said over and over again, no more sacrifices. Jesus has done it. No more sacrifices. Jesus has done it. It's complete. It's finished. But that doesn't mean that our faith as Christians is any less sacrificial.

Look one more time at verses 15 and 16 of our passage. In response to Jesus' one perfect sacrifice which sanctifies us and makes us holy, we are called to offer two sacrifices to God.

The sacrifice of praise and the sacrifice of good works and generosity towards one another. other. This is what it means to live and worship the holy God as his holy people.

We pour out our lives praising God for his goodness and grace and speaking joyfully about all he's done. And we pour out our lives doing good for one another, living generously, loving sacrificially in the same way that Jesus has loved and served us.

this is what it means to live as God's holy people and we should want this. We should want this for our life together.

[19 : 50] We should want this even if it puts us at odds with the worlds that we live in because we know that ultimately Jesus is so much better. That he's holy, that he will never change, that he'll never forsake us and that in him we look forward to a better city, a better kingdom, which will never be shaken and will never pass away.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.