

February 3, 2013

## Well-Pleasing Worship

Hebrews 13:1 – 9

We learned a few weeks ago when Pastor Craig spoke, that right at the center of community is God Himself. The pattern for how we are to live and love one another is found in the very relationship that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit enjoy. Tim Keller puts it like this: “*At the heart of the universe is the exploding love and joy that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have as they each defer to, glorify, center upon, rejoice in, and adore the others.*” And that is precisely how we are meant to live with and love one another. That is the consummate community. That is the relationship you so desperately seek, that is the love you are looking for in every set of arms; that is the beauty you are looking for in any face; that is the gold you're looking for in all your pursuit of wealth; that's the rest you're really looking for in all your homes and all your houses – nothing less is ever going to satisfy.

At the heart of the universe is the glory of God, the royal presence of God, the consuming fire nature of God. That is why the writer reminds his readers that ‘*...our God is a consuming fire.*’ At the heart of community is this consuming fire, this explosion of love and joy as the Father and Son and Holy Spirit delight in one another in community. And the writer is telling us that what we are about in community is offering acceptable worship to God – because He is at the center. We were meant to stand in the presence of God, and not to center on ourselves, but to defer to, to glorify, center on, rejoice in and adore the glory of God supremely together.

Originally, the letter the letter to the Hebrews read like this: *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may offer acceptable worship to God, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. Let brotherly love continue....*’ The writer moves right from talking about the central focus of everything and acceptable worship, to **brotherly love**, and **hospitality to strangers**, and **ministering to prisoners**, and **social justice**, and **sexual purity**, and **accountability** and **generosity of heart**. And I think we are supposed to conclude that **acceptable worship to God, real worship to God, is about community**. More than anything, this passage speaks to us of the community of the redeemed worshipping God together in a way that pleases Him. Worshipping God was never meant to be a solo show. The way we worship God, in spirit and in truth as John tells us, the way He is most magnified and glorified in us and in the world is in community – together.

The writer tells us to hold on to grace **so that** we can offer acceptable worship to God. The reason we need grace, the power of God working in and through us to do what we could never do, the reason we need sin-conquering, offense-covering, burden-bearing grace, is so that we can offer acceptable worship to God. The word acceptable simply means ‘**well-pleasing**’; that is, it is something that is done in a way that pleases someone. And that someone is God. And so the question is, **what is well-pleasing worship?** What does worship that is pleasing to God look like? Before we answer that, let's look at a few places where this word is use elsewhere in the Bible.

*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, well-pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and well-pleasing and perfect.* Romans 12:1-2 Paul is talking about living in a way that pleases God and **that** he says is worship. In chapter fourteen of Romans, Paul talks about living in such a way that we do not cause our brothers to stumble. And again he connects our well-pleasing living with worshipping God. *For he who in this way serves Christ is well-pleasing to God and approved by men.* Romans 14:18 And in Philippians, Paul connects the way we handle money with well-pleasing worship: *But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.* Philippians 4:18

What becomes clear is that well-pleasing worship has much to do with all of life. And if we look at this matter throughout the Bible, we see that worshipping God is consistently linked to what we do and how we do it. When Moses was on the mountain with God and he prays, ‘Lord, show me Your glory’ – what we hear is the heart-cry of worship. And what the Lord proceeds to do is give His people a blueprint for well-pleasing worship. That's the book of Leviticus. Now I know many of us resolve every year to read the Bible straight through – Genesis to Revelation.

And we all start our well. Genesis and Exodus are really very interesting – intrigue, murder, sex and violence – really riveting stuff. But then we get to Leviticus and we all die there. All our good intentions die in Leviticus. Why? Because Leviticus is full of boring minutia – how to dress, how to treat your neighbor, how to relate to your servants, what to eat, what not to eat – and we lose momentum in Leviticus. And yet, if we understand what the Lord is saying to us, it all changes. What He is telling Moses and what He is telling us, is that well-pleasing worship is inescapably linked to what we do – how we live before Him. And this is exactly what the writer of the book of Hebrews is telling his readers.

Well-pleasing worship looks like **brotherly love**, and **hospitality to strangers**, and **ministering to prisoners**, and **social justice**, and **sexual purity**, and **accountability** and **generosity of heart**. Well-pleasing worship is living before God in community, glorifying Him in what we do. Well-pleasing worship is not coming to church on Sundays, or singing songs, or praying long prayers, or reading the Bible through in a year or what we might think of as churchy stuff. All those things are part of well-pleasing worship, but in and of themselves they are not what the Bible talks about as being worship that pleases God. He isn't interested in someone who comes to church on Sunday, to sing and read and pray and listen to a sermon, and then live any way they want the rest of the week. The way we worship God, the way we can have worship that is well-pleasing to Him is through a radical commitment to Christian community. The way in which we experience the presence of God in our lives, the way in which the glory of God shapes us, is not through performances or rituals or observances, but through deep participation in community created by God through grace.

And so the question again is, what is well-pleasing worship? What does worship that is pleasing to God look like? Last week we looked at the first thing about well-pleasing worship – **philadelphia** – brotherly love. The first thing about **well-pleasing worship is that it is a radical commitment to one another** *Let brotherly love continue*. Hebrews 13:1 The fact that individually we have experienced the grace of God through Christ in the gospel, means that every other person who has experienced this grace, regardless of race or status or any other normally limiting factor, is our brother or sister – we are family. The Bible says let this kind of love continue. That is, don't put any roadblocks in the way of brotherly love; let it be kept secure, let it be constant, let it be enduring, let it be held continually – keep loving one another as brothers and sisters. That is well-pleasing worship.

### **Well pleasing worship is inclusive**

*Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it.* Hebrews 13:2 The ESV here translates this Greek word as hospitality. And that is good, but insufficient. The word here is **philoxenia** and it means more than just hospitality. **Philoxenia**, comes from, **fileo** – to love, and **xenos** – which means a stranger. First of all the writer says, *Let brotherly love continue – 'Be intentional about brotherly love – love those in the family.'* And then right on the heels of that he says, *Don't neglect to show hospitality to strangers – 'Be intentional about loving the stranger'*. Verse one says to work at loving the insiders, but verse two says work at loving the outsiders. What this says is that well-pleasing worship is very inclusive.

**Philoxenia** is an incredibly gospel-centered word. It means that you open your heart to those outside the family – strangers. You are to open your living space, your resources, your time for those who do not have family rights to those things, to people of whom otherwise you'd be suspicious. It was radical in that day and it is radical in our day. In the Greco-Roman society of the time of the book of Hebrews, success was based on the patronage system. That meant that you looked for people who could further your economic or political or social ambitions and you would hang with them. **Philoxenia** was the polar opposite – it meant that you looked for people who couldn't help you in any way and hung with them, you loved people that didn't necessarily love you back. **Philoxenia** – showing hospitality to strangers, was and is a powerful witness to the inclusiveness of the gospel community and is well-pleasing worship to God.

### **Well pleasing worship is identifying with those who are suffering for the sake of the Name**

*Remember the prisoners, as though you were in prison with them* Hebrews 13:3a In the day in which this letter was written, many Christians were being thrown into prison and thrown to the lions. And the writer was reminding these Christians that all those who were suffering for the sake of Christ were still part of this gospel-centered community and not to fear identifying with them. He was encouraging them to go to the prisons and see to their needs, care for their families, care for them – identify with those in prison because they were part of the Christian community. There was the natural tendency to disassociate yourself from those who had been grabbed by the authorities for fear that they would grab you next. But the writer was saying, 'Don't let fear keep you from owning their suffering – behave as though you were suffering right alongside.'

Now not all of us are being carted off to prison or killed just because we are Christians – but many of us are. One report I read said that 163,000 Christians die every year for their faith. Half of all the Christians who have ever died for their faith did so in this century alone, some 35 million! 15,000,000 of these were Christians who died under the Soviet regime between 1917 and 1980, primarily in prison camps. But many of us have never known real persecution – have never known what it means to make a declaration for Christ knowing that your family, your livelihood, your life is on the line. So how do we own those who suffer for the sake of the name? What does community look like? What does well-pleasing worship look like here?

When the writer says **Remember the prisoners**, he is saying 'Be mindful, recall to your mind, be thinking about those in prison for the faith' – in other words, don't let them sink out of sight in the community. Keep their life and situation before you all the time. And one of the best ways to do that is to pray. Every Tuesday night, we spend time in prayer for those around the world in specific places who are suffering like this. We have a realization that we are only part of a larger community of faith and some of our brothers and sisters around the world have been torn from their homes and families and churches and thrown into prison and we bring them before the throne of God in prayer. We put up as it were a wall of remembrance so that we can in some small way identify with them in their suffering.

### **Well pleasing worship is being strong for social justice**

*Remember...the mistreated, as though you yourselves were suffering bodily.* Hebrews 13:3b

Remember the mistreated, remember the oppressed, the writer says – just as if you were being oppressed. And I think one of the things this speaks to is concern for social justice. Without getting into a big debate on whether or not this leans too far into the social gospel, I would just say that the writer's concern here for the oppressed is the same concern Jesus shared – and it is part of the whole gospel. Concern for the oppressed, the downtrodden, the marginalized in society.

When Jesus began His ministry, this was His mission statement as He preached in the synagogue: *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,* Isaiah 61:1-2 The ministry of grace is incredible good news to the oppressed, the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive. Psalm 146 tells us that it is the Lord, *'...who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free... The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down... He upholds the widow and the fatherless.*

We don't have the time this morning, but Scripture makes it clear that unless our gospel is a gospel of word **and** deed, we really don't have the goods. James says *'This is true and undefiled religion, to visit orphans and widows in their distress...'* This is real worship. This is well-pleasing worship. Identify with those who are suffering oppression and injustice. Unless your faith compels you to stand against injustice, to do something about the oppressed, it isn't real.

### **Well pleasing worship is exclusive**

*Marriage must be respected by all, and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge immoral people and adulterers.* Hebrews 13:4 We said that well-pleasing worship is inclusive – that the community of grace embraces the insider and the outsider, the brother and the stranger – but here we see that it is also exclusive. That is there are things that well-pleasing worship does not embrace in community. Again this was a counter-cultural thought in that day – as it is in ours. In the society of that day, adultery and sexual immorality – the word is a strong word –  **pornos**  – fornicators, and it referred to those who had sex outside of marriage – was just as rampant as it is today and Christians stood out in stark contrast to that because they understood that marriage and sexual purity was not for themselves but for community.

We have a letter from that time from a Christian to a pagan named Diognetus, explaining the Christian faith. *They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed.* The contrast between Christians and the world was clear – they share their table but not their bed. They practice  **philoxenia**  but not  **pornos** . And in the ancient world as in today's world it is exactly opposite – they share their bed but not their table. Because at the heart of adultery and fornication is the root of selfishness – the desire to serve me first – and that is alien to community. And that is why the writer says that honoring marriage vows and keeping sexually pure is well-pleasing worship to God.

### **Well pleasing worship is being satisfied with God**

*Your life should be free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for He Himself has said, I will never leave you or forsake you. Therefore, we may boldly say: The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?* Hebrews 13:5-6 Since we are looking ahead to this unshakeable kingdom, we don't concentrate our affections and attentions on the accumulation of wealth. We are not looking to the material world to satisfy us. Again in the letter to Diognetus, the writer makes the point that Christians are not looking to money to satisfy them, but to God: **They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven...They are poor, yet make many rich.** And the writer of Hebrews makes the point that if God is your helper, what more could we possibly want? Well-pleasing worship is living with God as your satisfaction.

### **Well pleasing worship is being accountable**

*Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith.* Hebrews 13:7 Living in community means that we are accountable to one another. The writer points us to our earthly accountability – our leaders who speak God's word into our lives. Community is all about accountability and quite frankly, it is those who don't want to be accountable to anyone that run away from community. But that is really where we grow – rubbing shoulders with one another, living life with one another, carefully observing the outcome of each other's lives, consciously modeling our faith on men and women who really know God. And you can't know if they know God or not unless you see them up close and personal. Quite honestly, if you have not surrendered your life to the scrutiny of community, you're not growing in the faith – you may not even be saved. The worship that is pleasing to God is submitting yourself to the accountability of community.

### **Well pleasing worship is holding on to Christ**

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.* Hebrews 13:8 Because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever – hold on to Him. He is the only sure thing in this universe. Stars explode and die – animals go extinct – circumstances change – people change – loved ones die – friends desert you – but He will never change and He will never leave you and He will never forsake you – that is who He is. And what pleases Him is when we let everything else go to hold on to His hand.

### **Well pleasing worship is holding fast to the gospel**

*Don't be led astray by various kinds of strange teachings* Hebrews 13:9a Just as Jesus Christ never changes, so too the Good News of the gospel. Don't be fooled by those who claim to have new revelation, new insight, or try to make the gospel relevant by changing the message. The gospel doesn't change because of culture, time or audience – Noah was saved by grace through faith – Moses was saved by grace through faith – Martin Luther was saved by grace through faith – you and I are saved by grace through faith – and everyone who comes after us will be saved by grace through faith. What this also says is, keep the main thing the main thing – in the beginning, God created everything and said 'It is very good'. Sin entered, man fell, God sent His Son to be crucified, buried and resurrected to redeem sinners, the good news preached, and Christ will return to judge the living and the dead and to take us home to be with Him forever.

### **Well pleasing worship is established by grace not law**

*for it is good for the heart to be established by grace and not by foods, since those involved in them have not benefited.* Hebrews 13:9b Finally, the writer comes back to the power of community – grace. Well-pleasing worship is powered by grace, not legalism. Legalism is rules without relationship, appearance without reality, law instead of grace. It is a system based on fear and characterized by joyless judgmentalism, producing futility instead of freedom. Legalism regrets breaking God's rules – grace regrets breaking God's heart. Well-pleasing worship is grounded in grace, not in performance. The community of grace depends on the power of God, not rules, to live. The power of God fuels our behavior and fuels our worship.

*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.* Hebrews 12:28-29

As we celebrate communion this morning, let us worship God for His grace to us in calling us, saving us, sanctifying and justifying us and bringing us into the community of the redeeming so that we might proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

*Our gracious God and Father,*

*We worship You with all our heart and soul and strength and mind. We thank You Father for loving us and sending Your Son to redeem us; we thank You Jesus, for shedding Your precious blood to wash away our sins and covering us with Your own robe of righteousness to cover our unworthiness; we thank You Holy Spirit for igniting faith in our hearts and raising us to life and revealing to us the glories of Christ. We thank You Triune God for bringing us into the same community of fellowship that You enjoy eternally. We praise You for love so undeserved, so unspeakable, so wonderous and mighty to save the lost and raise them to glory. Draw us deeper into fellowship with You and with one another and make us a holy community that so magnifies and glorifies God, that it causes the world to believe in Your Son, and grant that we would delight in God through Jesus Christ spreading His joy through the gospel, we pray in the precious, life-giving, joy-filling, community-making name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.*