

August 2, 2015

# Acceptable Worship

Hebrews 12:28 – 13:25

This morning we come to the final chapter in this letter, written to a group of urban, first-century Christians who were struggling with fear and discouragement because their lives were so filled with troubles. They're asking the question, 'If God loves us so much, why do we have all this trouble?' They're on the verge of giving up, of shrinking back. And all the way through this letter, the writer is reminding them that life is a journey through the wilderness where you encounter hardship and trouble, a place where all your props are exposed and taken away, and **the only way you're going to make it through is by fixing your eyes on Jesus.** And then we come to chapter 13 where it seems like instead of powerful encouragements to keep looking at Jesus, we get a to-do list, some principles of Christian living – be loving, engage in hospitality, honor marriage, don't be sexually promiscuous, obey your leaders, and so on. But if that is all you see, you've missed the point the writer was trying to make.

To understand what he was trying to say, you have to start with the last two verses of chapter 12: *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.* He's come to the end here and given his readers a powerful prescription for an unshakeable faith, and then he says, 'In light of this, in gratitude for what God has done, worship God with reverence and awe, because He is a consuming fire.' And then he spends the next twenty-five verses fleshing out what acceptable worship looks like. And what it looks like is a community that is wholly consumed with God. He's told us we'll never make it through this wilderness without fixing our eyes on Jesus, and he reminds us that we'll never make it through unless we are engaged in deep community with all those whose lives are consumed by God.

He says, 'Offer acceptable worship to God because He is a consuming fire'. **In other words, the only acceptable way to worship God is to give everything you are.** It is to give God everything. The picture here goes back to Moses and the burning bush. When God called Moses, it was out of the middle of this bush that was on fire. It was burning, but it wasn't burned up. However, it was fully engaged. In a sense God was saying, 'Moses, see that bush? That's you. I'm going to consume you, but I won't burn you up.' You see, consuming fire speaks to us on two levels. On the one hand, as a consuming fire, God judges everything according to His own holiness and whatever does not stand the test will be burned up, consumed. On the other, all that remains is consumed with God, fully engaged with Him. That is why those who belong to God have no fear of the fires of judgment. Everything not of God has already been purged.

And the writer says 'This is the only kind of worship God will accept'. God will not share His glory with anyone or anything. He is not looking for a part-time follower. He doesn't want a percentage of your life, He wants it all. There is no arbitrary line between the sacred and the secular. All of life is in the sacred realm. There should be no disconnect between what you know and how you live. We have a tendency to think that God will be satisfied with our Sunday morning attendance or our occasional prayers and good works. He's not. He's a consuming fire. The troubles you're experiencing? The hardships you're enduring? The struggles you're having? These are designed to consume all that is not engaged with God Himself. He is the supreme treasure in the universe and our petty preoccupation with everything less than Him is not only tragic, it's suicidal. His desire is that He would be the sun around whom everything in our lives would orbit. He's a consuming fire. If you are not engaged in daily, profound, intense community life with others who have experienced the transforming power of Jesus, you're not worshipping God acceptably.

First of all he says 'The way to worship this consuming fire God is to: *Let brotherly love continue.* Philadelphia – brotherly love. That implies a community of people who are visibly, actively, loving each other because they belong to each other. They are a family. Brothers and sisters. Literally the writer says, 'Practice brotherly love, continually. Don't let it stop. Don't stop putting one another first. Don't stop thinking up ways to encourage and stimulate one another to love and good deeds. When life gets hard and storms threaten and hope is fading, let your love for one another continue.' The writer says, 'This is how you worship a God like this. Let love for one another consume you.' I can't remember who said it, but whoever said it, said it well: **You only love God as much as you love the one you love the least.**

You see, we've been born into the family of God. That implies a deep intimacy and love. Families know and love each other in ways that those outside the family do not. Families share life experiences. They share the joys and they share the sorrows. Sometimes they'd like to not belong, but they can't. They're family. Blood is thicker than water, even bad blood. Their success is your success. Their failures are your failures. You eat together, you play together, you do life together. To a great degree, you give up your privacy. You share your resources with each other. You put up with them and you love them because they're family. You laugh with them and you argue with them. You know them and they know you. They get into your business. You can't pretend to be other than you are with them because they know you. You are accountable to one another. They give you unwanted advice. There is a deep intimacy in family. You see, if you just come to church events and you never allow yourself to get into deep community with one another, you belong to a kind of Christian club; you're not part of a Christian community. Brotherly love is a consuming kind of love.

So the acceptable worship the writer is talking about begins with loving each other. In other words, it begins at home. But it doesn't stop there: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* We need **philadelphia**, and we need **philoxenia**. Love of the brothers and love of the stranger. Xenia means stranger, and as a verb it means to do hospitality. Take in the stranger. A lot of people get the idea of love your brother, as difficult at times as that can be. But love the stranger? There are a lot of cities that are named Philadelphia – at least 26 in the US. But I've never heard of a city named Philoxenia. Acceptable worship includes loving the stranger. Taking in the outsider. Sharing your resources, opening your home, opening your wallet, opening your heart to the stranger. Hospitality. **Philoxenia**. The writer says do this because if you don't you may miss the Lord. This is a probably a reference to the story in Genesis where three strangers came to Abrahams tent and he took them in. One of them turned out to be the Lord. You see, when we do **philoxenia**, we not only meet God ourselves, we introduce the outsider to the community of God. We bring them in.

And then he says, *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.* This is a reference to those who are in prison for the cause of Christ. God has ordained it so that not everyone is in prison at the same time. Some, perhaps most, Christians are at liberty and peace, while others suffer under the hand of unjust men in prison. I must confess that I don't know how to suffer with them as though I were there myself. I don't know how to share the sorrow of those who are mistreated as though I feel their pain. But Jesus does. He knows. He cares. And that life that bore the greatest injustice and sorrow is imparted to me as grace so that I might take up their burden in any way I can – through persistent prayer, through visiting them in prison, through helping their families while they are in prison. And though I know nothing of suffering for the sake of Christ, other than the stories that have come down to us from history, and the ongoing story still unfolding around the world today, I am envious. I am envious because suffering for His name's sake is a high honor and privilege that has not yet been granted to me. Philippians 1:29 says this, *'For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.'* And the text here indicates that this is a high honor – not only were they granted the gift of faith – but also the gift of suffering for the name of Jesus. We are to be consumed with this.

And then he moves to the centerpiece of the family – marriage. *Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.* **Acceptable worship involves sexual purity.** He talks about the marriage bed and since there is such confusion today about marriage, let me make it clear that he's not including so-called 'gay marriage'. Leviticus makes it clear that homosexuality is an abomination in God's eyes and so the author would not be saying that men or women in so-called gay marriage could have an undefiled marriage bed. But he also includes the sexually immoral and adulterous. He's talking about sex outside of marriage, and he's talking about sexual immorality. There are men and women in the church, who may not have sex outside of marriage, but they're enslaved to pornography. In fact, the statistics indicate that on the average, nearly fifty percent of men in churches struggle at some level with pornography. Now I know no one wants to really deal with that issue or even believe the statistics. But the truth is, the writer of Hebrews, while he didn't have the internet, knew that in his culture, illicit sex and pornography were a big deal, and apparently a big deal in the church of his day too. And so he says, 'Don't think that you can offer acceptable worship apart from sexual purity.' I know there are guys here today who are struggling with this, and perhaps even some women. Don't struggle alone. You won't make it. Being in community means that your struggles are our struggles.

Acceptable worship also means that we don't let our hearts get weighed down with money: *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"* The love of money literally means an **inordinate fondness for silver**. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.* This is the problem with money – it seduces us away from Christ, and creates in us a desire for more money, and we think if we just had enough money things would be better, life would be good; but we are never satisfied. There is never enough. The antidote to the love of money is a God who says, 'I will never fail you. I will never forsake you.' Acceptable worship means that we live a life of being content with what we have, not encouraging a desire for more stuff. The best way to live a life free from the desire to get is to live a life consumed with the desire to give. In fact we should be consumed not with getting but with giving.

In the second century, a guy named Lucian of Samosata, wrote a scathing satire on Christianity called *The Passing of Perigrinus* where he says, ***'These deluded creatures, you see, have persuaded themselves that they are immortal and will live forever, which explains the contempt of death and willing self-sacrifice so common among them. It was impressed on them too by their lawgiver that from the moment they are converted, deny the gods of Greece, worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws, they are all brothers. They take his instructions completely on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods and hold them in common ownership'***. What he was mocking was this utter contempt among Christians to run after individual wealth and instead pour it all back into community. They understood that this was acceptable worship. They understood that their brother or sister in Christ had a claim on their wallet and that their money was not theirs to do with what they liked. They knew the truth of Jesus' words, *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

And then the writer says: *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.* In other words we are to look at the lives those in the faith who led the way for us in the past, who taught us the word of God – and we are to consider what the outcome was of their life of faith. And as they modeled the promises of God imitate that kind of faith. And here the emphasis is on finishing well – some start out with a bang and end with a whimper – don't imitate that kind of faith. Imitate those who had the kind of faith that caused them to be satisfied with God and not with things. You see, if Jesus could be trusted yesterday, by those who went before, then He can be trusted today and forever. The same grace that sustained those who led us in the faith yesterday is available for us today, and tomorrow, and next week, next year, next decade, and forever. The very unchangeableness of God is the solid rock confidence and joy of our faith – and produces a profound contentment with whatever He gives and wherever He leads.

*Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.* Because Jesus Christ is the same and unchangeable – don't be seduced by someone with a new kind of teaching – He is always the same, and His word remains unchangeable. There are two giant enemies of the church in the world today – the first is materialism, and here is the second, heresy – various and strange the Bible calls them. Materialism seduces our hearts, and heresy seduces our minds. Heresy comes in when our confidence in God is low – when we have been seduced away from the faith by money and prosperity seeking, we begin to find alternatives to the clear word of God, and begin to explain things in our terms and not in God's terms.

The writer says that our strength moreover, comes from grace and not from food, or ceremonial rules about food. Evidently there were some strange teachings about food going around the churches at that time – not so different from now, and they were causing ones to lose their grip on grace. We don't know the details of these teachings, but no doubt they were similar to teachings about food you might hear today – rules on fasting and abstinence of various foods, vegetarianism and food supplements and anti-oxidants and organic versus processed foods, or caffeine free, fat free, sugar free and chemical free foods. And sometimes diets get linked to holiness and performance, and obsessive behaviors result that cause people to stop trusting God and begin trusting in diets. I have seen particular ways of eating that have taken on a life-consuming importance, and gradually the promises they make for our well-being become substitutes for the promises of God and we stop living by faith. Don't be consumed by food.

The writer reinforces this thought in the next few verses: *We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood.* The point of this was to show us that it is by trusting in Christ, not by eating the right foods that we are sanctified. In the Old Testament, it was the priests who ate the food of all the offerings before the Lord except one. The offering for sin, which was realized in Christ Jesus, was taken outside the camp and burned up and not eaten. And the altar he speaks about here is the cross of Christ – where grace and mercy flowed down for our salvation. If we are going to eat anything – it is grace we need to eat. The nourishment we desperately need to receive is forgiveness and hope, not meat. What he is telling us is that what was once acceptable worship under the old Levitical priesthood is no longer the acceptable way to worship. You see under that old system there were rules about food and sacrifices and how we live holy lives. But the writer tells them that now, through His own blood, Jesus makes His people holy, not through the blood of bulls and goats and eating the right foods. In other words, reality has replaced ritual. Acceptable worship is outside the camp. Outside the camp of ritual and ceremony.

And so the place of worship has changed: *Therefore let us go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured.* The writer is saying two things here. Real worship has nothing to do with religious rituals. Real worship is outside that camp. Doing stuff to make yourself acceptable to God has nothing to do with worshiping God. Remember he's writing to converted Jews. Their very identity and acceptance by God had been built on religious observances – eating the right food, making the right sacrifices, praying the right prayers. But the writer is also telling them they have to leave that camp and join Jesus outside the camp. They have to identify with Christ and share His reproach. You see, to be outside the camp, meant that these Jewish believers would be shamed, reviled, bad-mouthed and shunned. To identify with Christ meant that they would lose their friends, lose their position, perhaps lose their jobs. They would suffer rejection. Not only would the world hate them, those who were once their friends would too. Acceptable worship means that you identify with Jesus in spite of the pressures to not join Him outside the camp.

True followers of Jesus have always found this to be the case. You can be the nicest Christian in the world and still suffer rejection and reproach and persecution. In fact, if there isn't that element in your life, there may be some question as to your authenticity. In the early 1900's Japan was in the process of taking over Korea. They also happened to be aggressively persecuting many of the leading Christians and carrying them off to Japanese jails. Korean believers who were not arrested felt somewhat left out as though by not being arrested they were somehow lacking in their Christianity. A Korean Methodist pastor went to a missionary and said, 'There must be something wrong in our church. I fear we are lacking in faith. There are thirty-seven Presbyterians in jail, and only one Methodist.' Jesus told His disciples that '*A servant is not greater than His master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you*'. He didn't say might or may, He said will. Acceptable worship is to identify with Jesus outside the camp.

Outside the camp also implies some kind of impermanence, and the writer follows that up: *For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.* Over and over again, the Bible makes it clear that this world is not our real and lasting home. We live in houses and cities, but these are not our real homes. Think of it. We live on this earth for sixty, seventy, eighty years – even one hundred. What is that in light of eternity? Christians are those who are always looking ahead to eternity. What happens in time is only important as it impacts our eternal future. What should consume our thinking is not what we have here, but what we have there. That is why Christians can praise God even in the middle of devastating circumstances and loss. *Through Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name.*

Remember chapter eleven and the testimony of those who went before? *These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.* C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* wrote, '*I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.*' Acceptable worship is living a life with eternity in view. It means that we don't get rooted in this world and the things of this world. Our comfort, our joy, our satisfaction is all wrapped up in that other country and it frees our hearts to serve God and one another with glad and thankful passion. It frees us to do good and share with others: *Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.* That is what the writer calls acceptable worship.

And now the writer really gets into our business: *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.* He links this to acceptable worship, and you want to ask, 'What is he talking about?' This is a difficult passage for a leader to preach on for a couple reasons. The first is that in our culture, self-determination and personal freedom, not obedience and submission, are the defining values. Very simply, people don't want to hear a word about 'obey your leaders', 'submit to your leaders'. That is incredibly confining and restrictive. But the word of God puts a premium on obedience and submission. 'Obedience is better than sacrifice' God says through Samuel to a rebellious king Saul; and rips the kingdom from him because of his disobedience. 'Wives, obey your husbands', 'Children obey your parents', 'Slaves obey your masters'. Obedience is the mark of a soul transformed by the gospel, and obedience says, 'God, what you want is more important than what I want'. That's acceptable worship.

The second reason this is a difficult passage is because of the fallible nature of leaders. Leaders are human; leaders can make mistakes; leaders have all the same sin-issues their followers do. So what does it mean to obey and submit to them? The first word means to "be persuaded by" or "trust" or "rely on" and is translated here "obey" because that is what you do when you trust somebody. The word 'submit' means that you yield, you give way to the God-ordained authority in your life. The emphasis here is on an obedience that comes from being persuaded that something is true. That is why the writer says, *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.* Your leaders are called upon to persuade the people that follow them with the truth of the word of God. It is never a case of 'Do this because I say so', but rather 'Do what I show you from God's Word.' 'Follow me as I follow Christ'. Paul told Timothy: *Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* To obey and submit to your leaders is to obey and submit to Christ, and that is acceptable worship.

Finally, acceptable worship looks like praying for each other. Look at how the writer ends this: *Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.* The writer says, 'Pray for us' and then he prays for them. This intense, radical new community into which we have been called, worships God by praying for each other. This is acceptable worship the writer says.

Our God is a consuming fire. If you want to be part of this close, intense, deep kind of community then you have to know that it requires all of you, not just part of you. The writer emphasizes this when he writes: *the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant.* Most commentators agree that what this means is that the resurrection of Christ was brought about through the sprinkling of His blood in the heavenly sanctuary. ***His resurrection is the demonstration that His sacrifice of Himself was acceptable to God.*** In other words, He offered acceptable worship. The writer links the exaltation of Jesus to His all-consuming sacrifice on the cross. And that says that God is not satisfied with anything less than our whole being. You won't get away with being a part-time Christian, or a consumer Christian. Our God is a consuming fire.

Dear saints, we are on a wilderness journey. There are hardships and dangers and disappointments along the way and you will not make it on your own. But there is incredible joy and security and strength when you get plugged into a community of believers whose lives are consumed by God. As we come to the table this morning, let us remember that Jesus gave His life for this. He laid aside all the splendor of His glory and poured out His life blood so that we might be brought into this radical new community where God Himself is our all-consuming center and we might offer acceptable worship with reverence and awe.

*Dear heavenly Father,*

*Grant that we might see and savor with unclouded eyes the glory of Your grace that has drawn us into this community of faith. Grant it Lord that You would be our all-consuming center. Teach us that there is no real joy or satisfaction apart from You. The heavens declare Your glory, the earth trumpets forth Your riches, Your presence fills the universe, and in You we live and move and have our being. May all our lives bear the marks of our consuming fire God. As we travel through this wilderness life, grant that we find ourselves engaged in deep fellowship and community, loving one another, and loving the outsiders, praying for those in prison and praying for each other, committed to purity and generosity, and living in submission to those you have given us to lead. With our lives may we offer acceptable worship to You with reverence and awe we pray in the powerful saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*