

July 5, 2015

The Pleasure of God

Hebrews 10: 1 – 18

As we move through the book of Hebrews, we've said more than once that this is a letter written to 1st century urban believers who were struggling with hardship and loss in their lives and wondering whether or not they should just forget about this Christian thing and go back to Moses and the Law. They're wrestling with the question: 'If God loves us so much, why are we in this pickle?' They're in the wilderness; they're in the desert, and there's no food, there's no water, and they want to go back. And the writer is constantly reminding them that the only way through this wilderness is to keep their eyes on Jesus – He's the final word, He's better than the prophets, or the angels or Moses; He's our King, our Captain, our Brother and our great High Priest. He knows our weaknesses, He sympathizes with our struggles; He endured the unendurable and came through to victory. Therefore He is able to save. Keep looking to Him.

The writer keeps coming back to this in every chapter because there seems to be the tendency among these guys to turn their focus away from Jesus to other things. They were engaged in doing stuff to ease their consciences and please God. The writer of Hebrews was writing to an audience that was very familiar with all of the rites and rituals and sacrifices in Judaism, and it sounds like they were substituting tradition and ceremony, and even sacrifices for the real thing. That was the culture out of which they had been saved. If you read the Old Testament history of the Jews, you see this time and time again. The problem was that they didn't really want to obey God. They didn't want to do what He said, so they tried to cover that with 'doing church'. There was tendency to lean on the law instead of on Jesus. So the writer says, *For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.*

In other words, if the sacrifices were really effective you wouldn't have to keep making them. You see, these people were going to church, doing the right stuff, outwardly looking like they were obeying God, but inwardly doing their own thing. And I think that sometimes we prefer doing 'church stuff' instead of running after a relationship with Christ Himself. In Amos 5 God tells His people: *"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* In other words, 'You're obeying the law outwardly, but inwardly you're doing your own thing.' God is after a river of righteous living that flows from an inward obedience.

And so the writer of Hebrews says, 'If God simply wanted you to do stuff, then sacrifices would have been good enough.' But it isn't, and it wasn't because he tells them: *Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.* The point here is that God is not after us doing stuff for Him in an effort to please Him. *Consequently, when Christ came into the world, He said, "Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body have You prepared for Me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings You have taken no pleasure.* In other words, there is something that delights the heart of God; something that brings Him pleasure. And what this passage shows us is what pleases God; why we can't please Him; how Jesus makes it possible to please Him. What pleases God, why we can't, how Jesus makes it possible.

What is it that pleases God? What does He take delight in? It's in the text there: *Consequently, when Christ came into the world, He said, "Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body have You prepared for Me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings You have taken no pleasure.* Here the writer is quoting an Old Testament passage from Psalm 40, verse 6. *In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.* If you compare the New Testament quote with the reference in Psalm 40, you immediately see that the phrase, '*you have given me an open ear*' has been changed to read *a body have You prepared for Me*. At first blush this may appear to be a problem.

But the word translated by the phrase *you have given me an open ear*, literally refers to pierced ears. In other words the psalmist is saying, 'You have pierced my ears'. Now this may not seem significant until we turn to Exodus 21. In this chapter, God is speaking to Moses, telling Him all the laws and ordinances of the covenant He is making with His people. And He comes to the bit about how to handle slaves; in particular, Hebrews slaves. And He says that if they buy a Hebrew slave, the slave must serve for six years, but on the seventh, they are to go free. And then verses 5 and 6: *But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,' then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.*

That pierced ear would tell anyone who saw him, that here was a slave who served out of love and gratitude, not mere servitude. It meant that really, he was a '**slave for love's sake**' and he chose to belong to his master and not to himself. And so the writer here substitutes body for ear to convey the whole thought to his readers who were quite familiar with the O.T. And the thought is that his pierced ear represents his total commitment to his master. That is, that God does not want sacrifices of animals, or rituals and ceremonies of worship from His people – **but rather a voluntary, love-begotten obedience as a living sacrifice**. And the Psalmist finishes that thought in verse 7 – *I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart.*" With a heart of a bond slave, the will of our Master is not merely a duty, but our joy – we need no reminders of what we ought to do – His will is inscribed on the tablets of our hearts. And the path to that kind of life begins and ends with obedience.

The writer of Hebrews is saying this is the path that Jesus walked when He came: *7 Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of Me in the scroll of the book.'*" The thing that pleases God is the life that is obedient to His will. This is what the Father thundered from heaven when His Son was on the earth – 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased'. Here it is – this is the thing – '*I have come to do your will.*' Knowing what the Father really delights in, the Son says to the Father, "Behold, I have come." He comes to do what the Father delights in. What the Father delights in is spoken of "*in the roll of the book,*" the Old Testament, and what is revealed there is the Father's will. You see, **God is not impressed with our grand gestures of religion – He is not awed by how we arrange the sacrifice on the altar – He does not celebrate our good intentions – He wants obedience.** He wants a people who say unreservedly, '*I have come to do Your will.*' This is what pleases God – this is what causes His heart to rejoice. All of the bulls and goats we offer in lieu of obedience will never please Him. All the Bible knowledge we possess, all the verses we've memorized, all the good deeds we have done, will never take the place of simple, honest, direct obedience. I think it is true what John Maxwell once observed: "**Most Christians are educated way beyond their level of obedience.**"

So what really pleases God is obedience, not sacrifice. But unfortunately, that is our default mode. We'd rather look like we're obeying, rather than actually obeying. When Saul was made king of Israel, he probably looked like a good choice at first. Tall, handsome, comes from a good family, kingly in appearance – but there was a character issue with Saul that ultimately ruined him – he never dealt with his disobedient heart. He had a disobedient streak in him a mile wide. In chapter 13 we find the enemy of Israel, the Philistines, gearing up to wipe them out. And so Saul gathered the army of Israel and waited at a place called Gilgal because the Lord, through His prophet Samuel, had set the time and the place. But as Saul and the army waited, and waited, and waited some more – Samuel didn't show – for seven days they waited. And the people, the Bible says, had followed Saul and were waiting with 'trembling'. To put it bluntly – they were afraid. The enemy had 30,000 tanks (chariots) and 6000 Stryker vehicles (horsemen), and all they had were two thousand guys, of whom only two had swords – Saul and Jonathan.

The odds were long and the outcome was not much in doubt – and the guy who was supposed to help out with sacrifice and prayer was nowhere to be found. So they began sneaking off, until only 600 were left. Saul, being understandably nervous, then decides to take things into his own capable hands and so he offers the sacrifice. But all he had been told to do was gather the people and wait. That's it – go to Gilgal and wait. So we read in 1 Samuel 13: *He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him.* 9 So Saul said, "Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings." And he offered the burnt offering. 10 As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came. And Saul went out to meet him and greet him.

11 Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, **12** I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering." **13** And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you. For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. **14** But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."

Obedience is doing what God has said even when it looks like disaster is about to happen. It was Oswald Chambers who said that the root of all sin is the suspicion that God is not good – and I think the root of all disobedience may well be **the suspicion that God ultimately will not come through for us**. Yes, He has told us to wait – and yes, He's said not to worry about anything, pray about everything, and yes, He's got a guy who's coming – but everything's going to hell in a hand basket around us and the enemy has overwhelming fire power and I've only got two swords and one them is rusty, and...and...and...I'll do this thing myself!

But at the deepest part of our disobedience is the overwhelming desire for independence. We don't want to go to the doorpost and get our ears pierced. We'd rather not have someone else tell us what to do. We want to be free to do our own thing. Elisabeth Elliot, who recently went to be with the Lord, once told a story of her brother Thomas Howard. Their mother let him play with paper bags she'd saved if he put them away afterwards. One day she walked into the kitchen to find them strewn all over the floor. Thomas was out at the piano with his father singing hymns. When she confronted him, he protested, "But Mom, I want to sing." His father said, "*It's no good singing God's praises if you're disobedient.*" The problem is systemic and deep. We are born rebellious and disobedient. You don't have to teach this to anyone. My oldest daughter told me that one day she was getting pretty frustrated at Ava who seemed to continually ignore what she was telling her to do, which resulted in quite a few spankings. The last time it happened she was pretty fed up and just said, "Ava when are you going to start actually **obeying** me?!" Without skipping a beat, her answer came, "*Later.*" Which actually meant never.

What pleases God is obedience. What delights God is a **voluntary, love-begotten obedience from a people who say 'I delight to do Your will, O God'.** But we don't want to obey. We know we need to at some level. But we have a rebellious heart. The problem is deep. All the way through the Bible the Lord confronts us with this issue: **But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts, 'Let us fear the LORD our God.'** We are always looking for ways to get around this, but we'll never be able to because we have this heart problem. We try offering up sacrifices that don't accomplish what we want them to. We don't kill animals, but we may try to kill off the sinful parts of us in the hope that God might be pleased with us. We try to carry it out by ourselves, on ourselves. We try to pull ourselves together and discipline ourselves to do the right thing, and when we don't, we try harder, or we ask God to help us - all in an effort to be acceptable to God. But we're never satisfied even with ourselves, so like the priests, we try again and again. We offer self-sacrifices and punish ourselves with guilt "continually."

I wish I had a dollar for every time someone has told me, 'I know I need to go to church, and get back to God, but I've got to get my life together first.' Listen, if you could get your life together, you wouldn't need God. And even if you got it together, you wouldn't want it when you got it all together. Some of us are like the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale in "The Scarlet Letter.". Hounded by guilt for committing adultery, "He kept vigils, likewise, night after night, sometimes in utter darkness; sometimes with a glimmering lamp; and sometimes viewing his own face in a looking-glass, by the most powerful light which he could throw upon it. He thus typified the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not, purify himself." But nothing he could do could cleanse his conscience and make him pleasing to God. Nothing we can do will either. On our own we cannot please God.

You see, we won't willingly go to the doorpost. Our hearts are too disobedient, our wills too strong, our desires too self-gratifying. But Jesus went to the doorpost for us. It is only through His sacrifice that we can even think about being obedient. **8** When He said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law) **9** then He added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. **10** And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

His body was pierced, the awl was driven through His flesh, He was the One who said, 'Not My will but Yours be done. I love you Father, I will not go out free'. And the text tells us that by His will, by His perfect obedience, we are sanctified, made holy. The writer reinforces this idea in verse 14: *But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until His enemies should be made a footstool for His feet. 14 For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.* This idea of sanctification is troublesome for many. It is troublesome because some people see sanctification as something **they must do** to get right with God. It is also troublesome for those who see sanctification as a one-time-good-for eternity thing. And that is true – *we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* But it is also true that we are *He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.* It is troublesome in the respect that once someone claims to have had a conversion experience – but then their life exhibits no fundamental change – the word of God is questioned, and we have to either doubt the word of God, or make excuses for our lives.

So the question is, 'Is it done – or is it happening?' 'Are we perfected – or are we still in process?' And the answer to that is a resounding – 'YES'. Yes' we were sanctified – and 'Yes' we are being sanctified. So how is that possible? First of all take that phrase – *He has perfected for all time.* Does that mean that Christians don't sin? Don't get sick? Never make a mistake? That we are already perfect in our attitude and behavior? That we obey perfectly? That cannot be the case since the writer goes on to say that those He perfected forever are also *those who are being sanctified.* Notice the tenses here. The first, *has perfected*, is in the past tense indicating that this is a work begun and completed in the past. And the second, *are being sanctified* is obviously in the present tense, indicating an ongoing work. Those who belong to Christ Jesus are perfected in the sense that on the basis of His obedience, God puts away all our sin, forgives our many sins, and never brings them to mind again as a grounds for condemnation. When He looks at His blood-washed, redeemed people, all He sees is the blood of Christ that has cleansed us and given us right standing with Him. In regard to the condemnation of sin, we stand perfected – He does not count our sin against us.

But what about those *who are being sanctified?* This means that sanctification is also an ongoing work. The first is **positional** – it is about right standing, and happened in the past. The second is **experiential** and is happening right now. It tells us that there is an ongoing process of sanctification. I think 1 Peter 1:14-15 says it best: '*As obedient children, do not be conformed to your former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves in all your behavior;..*' If we belong to God, if we are truly children of God, it means that we've been taken to the doorpost, and His piercing has become ours, and our obedience is based now not on law but on love for our master. Something happens within us that produces a **voluntary, love-begotten obedience that causes us to say 'I delight to do Your will, O God'.** Our affections have been transferred from ourselves to God, and although we do it imperfectly, our highest ambition becomes to please Him and not ourselves.

A long time ago, a 19th century Scottish theologian, Thomas Chalmers, described this as the expulsive power of a new affection. Chalmers said that there is only one effective way of dealing with the deep-rooted rebellion of the heart, and that is to have our affections turned wholly to God. He says the only way is to '*... [set] forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one.*' Until the heart is captured by something more enticing, something more fulfilling, there can be no real change. But when the love of God fills us from within, then we experience new desires, and "the expulsive power of a new affection" becomes a reality for us.

You see, what pleases God is obedience to His will; but as fallen human beings, we are incapable of that kind of obedience. But God was unwilling to leave us in disobedience so He took His son to the doorpost and pierced Him on our behalf so that through Him we can say, '*I love You Lord and I will not go out free. My pleasure is to do Your will, O God.*' And the text here tells us that is precisely what happens when we believe on Him. *And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put My laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," 17 then He adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."* The gospel absolutely changes your motives from the inside. It takes the law of God that you must obey and writes it in your mind and on your heart. Our thinking is transformed and our desires are reformatted.

The law of God, the things He wants you to do, don't just become things you have to do, but things you want to do. Not things you have to do in order to get control of Him, but things you want to do to please the One who did this. Not the things you have to do to avoid condemnation, but the things you want to do to please the One who died rather than lose you. John Newton sets this out in a great hymn:

*Our pleasure and our duty,
Though opposite before,
Since we have seen His beauty
Are joined to part no more.*

*To see the law by Christ fulfilled
And hear His pard'ning voice,
Transforms a slave into a child,
And duty into choice.*

The gospel not only transforms our motives, it frees us from the endless cycle of offering sacrifices that cannot take away our sin or deal with our disobedience. Verse 18 says, *Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin*. When God has taken us to the doorpost and we have embraced the Son that was pierced for us, what rises up is a **voluntary, love-begotten obedience from a new heart that says 'I delight to do Your will, O God'**.

Our good and gracious heavenly Father,

Obedience is not our strong suit – rebellion comes more easily to us. For some reason our own way too often looks better than Yours. And yet we do not want to remain there. We long to have hearts eager to obey. We confess and repent of choosing our own way over Yours. Cleanse our hearts we pray – renew a right spirit, a spirit of obedience within us. Do not leave us to go our own way – instead make us willing to obey You. Turn our eyes from the lure of worthless things and give us an eagerness for Your things. Help us abandon our shameful ways and make us walk along the path of Your commands. Let Your word be more precious to us than anything – cause us to meditate and think about what You have said to us. Let it sink down deep in our souls and change the way we think and the way we live. If You will help us – we will run to follow You. In our innermost heart we long to obey You and bring You glory. Bring us to the doorpost this morning and pierce our ears. We choose to be Yours for love's sake and no longer live for ourselves, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

*May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.*