

“The Instruments of Our Worship” – Hebrews 13:15-16

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 13...

Last week we considered some of what the Bible says about the nature of Christian worship and how it is more than just the songs that we sing together when we gather on Sunday. It includes that, certainly, but it is not limited to that (though we sometimes use the language of worship as if it were). And what our passage last Sunday forced us to ask is “What is acceptable worship?”

For the most part we limited our attention to where the text focused our attention, namely, the manner with which we should offer our worship to God. Not really the form or medium, but what our worship should be marked by in its various shapes. From the final two verses that closed the previous chapter, we considered our posture in worship and concluded that worship that is pleasing to God must be marked by appreciation and awe. If we understand worship as a response to who God is and what God has done, then the closing words of chapter 12 fit that definition like a glove. Listen to them once more.

“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, ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:28-29)

Because of what God has done for us in Christ, our worship is marked by gratitude. Because of who God is, we worship in reverent awe. Appreciation and Awe. This is the manner of acceptable worship. We considered this last week.

This morning, I want us to see something else this context teaches us about worship, but to do so we are going to have to jump ahead a bit in chapter 13, where we find a pair of verses that help us to see what “*acceptable worship*” looks like on the ground. So we are shifting from the manner of worship to the material manifestations of worship. Everything we’ve seen so far must be presupposed. With that in mind, look with me at verses 15 and 16, from chapter 13. I’ll read. You follow along. This is God’s Word...

“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (Hebrews 13:15-16)

Recently I picked up from my shelf a book, edited by D. A. Carson, that compiled a series of scholarly articles on the topic of worship authored by various evangelicals around the world. The final article was written by Miroslav Volf, a well-known Croatian theologian, who at the time of publication was teaching at Fuller Theological Seminary, but now is part of the faculty of Yale. One of the things that caught my eye in his article—which, by the way, was titled, “Worship as Adoration and Action: Reflections on a Christian Way of Being-in-the-World”—was something he said about the pair of verses we just read. And I quote...

“Christian worship consists both in obedient service to God and in the joyful praise of God. Both of these elements are brought together in Hebrews 13:15-16, a passage that comes close to giving a definition of Christian worship... The sacrifice of praise and the sacrifice of good works are two fundamental aspects of the Christian way of being-in-the-world. They are at the same time the two

constitutive elements of Christian worship: *authentic Christian worship takes place in a rhythm of adoration and action.*”¹

I think that’s a good assessment. And it’s interesting that he should claim that these verses get us about as close as any to a biblical definition of worship. Perhaps, then, we should pay close attention. Not, in the final analysis, because some theologian said these verses are important, but hopefully because we recognize that they come from holy writ, the very Word of God, inspired and preserved for our edification and instruction.

Before we get too deeply into these verses, however, let me caution you to not be thrown off by the sacrificial language in them. These are not sacrifices for the sake of atonement. They are not offerings that we take to the Lord so that He will forgive our sin and receive us into His presence. They are not meant to secure redemption. That’s not what is being described here. Why? Because this epistle has made it beyond clear that Christ alone can offer such a sacrifice and He has done so on our behalf when He offered Himself up on the cross (9:25-26; 10:10, 14, 18, 26; 13:9-10). That work is finished. Believers, through faith, have experienced full atonement. No other offering for sin is needed. But we are invited to offer a sacrifice of grateful and reverent worship, the sacrifice of praise and service that we offer through Christ, our great High Priest. Or as the Apostle Peter reminds us,

“As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 2:4-5)

Again we see that we offer these sacrifices “*through*” Christ. It would be hard to overstate how important that preposition is. You get that wrong and you get *unacceptable* worship. As Richard Phillips writes,

*“These words, together with the whole body of teaching in Hebrews, make clear how futile it is to offer service or sacrifice to God except ‘through Jesus.’ Apart from the trail he has blazed by his life and his death, apart from the access he has won for us with his blood, all the obstacles of our sin and God’s holiness stand firm against us. God’s wrath remains in deadly opposition to us, so that no one is received by God except ‘through him.’ This verse makes clear what ‘through Jesus’ the Christian life is all about: drawing near to God and living sacrificially unto him...”*²

That’s exactly right. We don’t come before God in our own name. We don’t come in our own strength. We come “*through*” Jesus because He is the “*one mediator between God and men*” (1 Tim. 2:5). Without Him, we would have nothing pleasing to bring to God. In other words, it is Christ’s sufficient and atoning sacrifice *for us* that issues in worshipful sacrifice *from us*, and both to the praise of His name.

But what exactly are these sacrifices that we bring “*through him*” to God in worship? They involve two things really, which correspond to our two verses—our words and our works, our adoration and our actions, our praise and our property. However you want to word it, that is the sacrificial pairing we observe in verses 15 and 16. And this shouldn’t surprise us. As F. F. Bruce once remarked,

*“Christianity is sacrificial through and through; it is founded on the one self-offering of Christ, and the offering of His people’s praise and property, of their service and their lives, is caught up into the perfection of His acceptable sacrifice, and is accepted by Him.”*³

That’s the idea we have in our text. So what remains for us, then, is to consider each of these ideas: the lips we use to praise our God and the labors we employ to please our God. Next time, we will consider the second of these and how the two relate (and their relationship is vital to grasp). Today, we’ll limit ourselves to the first...

LIPS that PRAISE GOD

Look once more at verse 15. “*Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.*” This one little verse calls to mind a lot of important imagery from the Old Testament, which they would have recognized quite naturally and which requires a bit more digging for modern readers. Let’s take it phrase by phrase. I don’t want to be too technical today, but I do want to help you appreciate just how much the language here is drawn from the language of Old Testament worship. He adopts the vocabulary and then reapplies it to us, the Church, in new ways.

For instance, the language here of “*sacrifice of praise*” was first used in Leviticus. In fact, in the Septuagint (which was the Jewish translation of Scripture common in Jesus’ day) the same exact words are those used for the thank offerings prescribed in Leviticus 7:12-15. These were, as the name implies, given in order to express gratitude to God for some kindness the person had experienced in their life. And this is analogous to what we, as Christians, do—“we freely offer our goods and our selves for his service and praise.”⁴

In noting the comparisons between these Jewish offerings described in the Law and the Christian offerings described here in Hebrews, one author observes that the Jewish thank offerings were considered “the highest expression of religion in Judaism, an occasional and special mark of piety”. So it’s interesting that the writer of Hebrews adopts this terminology to describe the praise of our lips and our service to other, which has come “to characterize the whole of our lives as children of God.”⁵ At least it should, because we are called to offer such sacrifices “*continually*” (Heb. 13:15). Here again I think Phillips’ comments are worth sharing:

“What a contrast this is to the way many view Christianity. For many, the highest aspiration is simply to ‘get saved.’ If they can just make it into heaven, that will be good enough for them. But this is not all that Christianity is about. Justification, a doctrine we rightly emphasize, is not the end of our salvation, but rather the means to a life of pleasing service unto God. Justification is often called the hinge on which the door of the gospel turns, and that is certainly true, but it is a door that is meant to be opened, to give us entrance into the presence of God, that we may live with joy and awe as royal children in this world, and offer our lives as sacrifices of praise for his service and pleasure. Jesus said that the Father is seeking worshipers to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23–24). It is for this that we are saved, to live sacrificially unto him, to offer a lifestyle of worship, for the blessing of others and for the glory of his name.”⁶

That doesn’t mean that you need to quit your job and start putting out resumes for vocational ministry. That’s not what he’s saying. “Instead, this means that all work really is religious, involving the worship of one god or another.”⁷ And as Christians, we are meant to live for the Lord, wherever He has placed us in the world. As Paul told the Colossians, “*Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*” (Col. 3:17). Similarly, to the Corinthians he said, “*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*” (1 Cor. 10:31). Rightly understood and utilized, all life can be an act of worship.

In fact, even in the Old Testament, this was understood. And you can see that understanding play out in the way the “*sacrifice of praise*” language is used in Psalm 50. We find the exact words used in Psalm 50:14 and 23 (cf. 107:22; 116:17). In fact, when you read through Psalm 50, and you should do that this week, you’ll notice that it reads like Hebrews, covering the same major themes. Or perhaps it might be better to say that the epistle to the Hebrews reads like one long exposition of Psalm 50 as it is interpreted through the work of Christ. In any case, the psalmist shows that there was already precedent for using this language for “oral expression of adoration toward God.”⁸ The psalm instructs us to “*Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving [i.e., praise], and perform your vows to the Most High. ... The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me*” (Ps. 50:14, 23). And this calling on our lives hasn’t changed this side of the cross.

Of course, we have more reason to worship this side of the cross. And in light of what Christ has done, our praise can be offered “*continually*”, that is, in all circumstances (cf. James 1:2-4).⁹ But, in truth, we are not too constant in this regard. “The busy rush of modern life often robs us of time for quiet reflection about all that we owe to God.”¹⁰ This is why I was so thankful for Raymond Brown this week, who helped me to see just how much the teaching of this chapter alone can fuel our worship and give content to our praise. I know we have only looked at a few verses so far, but just peruse the content for a moment.

“Do we not want to praise him for the ‘brotherly love’ (13:1) which has been shown to us in our Christian lives and for the generous hospitality we have often received (13:2)? Have people not cared for us in our needs, and shown compassion when we were in trouble (13:3)? Some of us thank God especially for loyal and loving partners in marriage, or for the fine example of a happy relationship we have seen in our own parents (13:4). Do we not want to praise God that he has met our material needs (13:5a) and assured us of his providential and protective care (13:5b-6)? Many of us bless God for outstanding preachers, teachers, Bible class leaders, Sunday School teachers, Christian parents and friends, who shared with us ‘the word of God’ and we praise him not only for the imperishable things they proclaimed, but also for their radiant Christian example (13:7). Every believer wants to offer a *sacrifice of praise* for the gift of Jesus, the changeless Lord, for his saving death, his present help, and his future plan (13:8). Can we not praise him for the sound doctrine imparted to us in the past and available to us today in holy Scripture, and for the fact that so many times our hearts have been ‘strengthened by grace’ (13:9)? All this, and so much more, should inspire our adoration and prompt our thanksgiving so that, not occasionally, but *continually*, that is whenever these great facts cross our mind, we should offer a *sacrifice of praise to God*.”¹¹

Do you see how this chapter is so helpful for drawing out praise? So one practical application of our sermon today might be to read and meditate on Hebrews 13 every day this next week. Why not carve out a few moments at some undisturbed point of each day to work through, line by line, this incredible chapter with the goal of allowing it to outline the praise that you offer up to God? You wouldn’t regret doing that this week. And how pleasing it would be to the Lord for you to do this “*through*” Christ.

The next phrase to note in verse 15 is clarification that the sacrifice we offer is “*the fruit of [our] lips*,” which is probably added to ensure no one thinks he is contradicting himself and encouraging some animal and Levitical sacrifice at the temple. But this expression—the “fruit of lips”—is also language that is drawn from the Old Testament. In this case, Hosea 14:2 (LXX)¹², where the prophet uses the idiom to refer to “repentant contrition” expressed to God in prayer.¹³ So the author continues to draw on the Old Testament language of worship and to describe the nature of Christian worship.

But notice the full extent of the clarifying remark. Our “*sacrifice of praise*” is to be understood as “*the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*” (Heb. 13:15). Interestingly, the word for “*acknowledge*” (*homologeō*) is related to the word we’ve seen at several key points in this letter for “*confession*” (*homologia*). You might remember that our author has described Jesus, for example, as “*the apostle and high priest of our confession*” (3:1) and he has, in various ways, been exhorting the readers to “*hold fast to [their] confession*” (4:14; 10:23). A confession is something we believe, something we will profess to others as our settled conviction. It wouldn’t be much of a confession though if it was so private to never be confessed in public, would it? No, our confession is a means through which we “*acknowledge his name*,” the name of Jesus, before God and man. Confessions are not meant to be kept in the silent recesses of our heart. They are meant to flow out to our lips. They are meant to go public. Paul told the Romans,

“‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” (Romans 10:8-10)

This should be our response to the Gospel. But what Paul describes there is the Christian's very first "*sacrifice of praise*" offered to God "*through*" Christ. It is "*the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*" (Heb. 13:15). But this fruit doesn't just ripen in the harvest of our conversion. It grows out of the soils of a Christian's entire life, a life of abiding in the Vine (John 15:1ff.), a life of worship. Which means, in part, that our lips are those that "*acknowledge*"—or "*confess*"—"his name."

So, here again, we see something that I touched on last week when I reminded you of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14, namely, that even though our worship is offered to God, it can have an evangelistic effect on others. We confess with our mouth. "If the sacrifice is made by our lips and not only by our hearts, then it becomes vocal and public; other people are soon aware of it."¹⁴ And God can and does use such publicity to draw others in because, after all, "*faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*" (Rom. 10:17), which is the very content of our confession. Therefore, in God's gracious design, acceptable worship offered to Him can actually be a good thing for those around us.¹⁵

But that's not how it works when your neighbor sees your car in your driveway on Sunday morning when the rest of us are gathering at church. That's not how it plays out when the people we converse with on a daily basis don't even know if we have a religious affiliation. That's not how it plays out, in other words, if our lips are not functioning as instruments of worship. The lost world doesn't need any more camouflaged Christians. The Christian faith is not an undercover operation. As long as it remains a covert mission in your life, you won't get to see the Lord make any converts through you. Your friends and neighbors don't need you to shield them from the good news. They need you to share it. They need you to speak up.

And please don't give me the line that's sometimes wrongly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "We should preach the Gospel always and, if necessary, use words." I know what you mean. We ought to live the Gospel. Amen. We should. And our sermon next week on verse 16, I hope, will help us to see how. But the truth is you can't really *preach* the Gospel with your lives. The Gospel is literally "news," it's "good news," that's what it means. Saying you are going to preach the Gospel and, if necessary, use words is like asking someone to give you their phone number and if necessary use digits.¹⁶ The number is by definition something made up of digits. Likewise, the Gospel is an announcement that involves words. No one's getting saved by watching you try to live a good life. Don't fool yourself. God can use that, but he will not awaken faith in the life of those people around you, if people are too ashamed to use their words. Sooner or later, the dots between your lifestyle and the gospel message must be connected. And they're not connected without words.

And let's be real. Usually people say things like that—"I just preach the Gospel with my life"—as a way to soothe their conscience because they are too afraid to open their mouths and tell someone about Jesus. It's easy to do nice things and let people think you're a pleasant person. Who's going to hate you for that? But you start sharing the Gospel with them—telling that Jesus came to earth, died on the cross, and rose to life because they were sinners in need of saving—and that's going to cost you something. That's what you're afraid of. And you're right. Sooner or later it will cost you something. But it's worth it. It's worth it because Jesus is worth it. And it's worth it because the Gospel is "*the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes,*" so don't you be "*ashamed*" of it (Rom. 1:16). Don't be embarrassed for people to see you offering "*a sacrifice of praise to God*" by "*the fruit of your lips*". Don't be afraid for people to see that you "*acknowledge his name.*"

The lost world around you—your friends and coworkers, parents and children, brothers and sisters, next door neighbors and clients—need to see and hear what Christ has done for you. Do they? Could they identify you as a disciple of Christ? Could they learn what a disciple of Christ looks like by observing you? Or perhaps we need to ponder that oft-repeated question—"Ask yourself, If I was accused of being a Christian, would there be sufficient evidence to convict me, or would I be found innocent of all charges?"¹⁷ May it never be. God help us.

There is more to say, but it will make more sense if I save it for next week. So I hope you'll join us again and we will consider verse 16 and its relationship to what has been said this morning. Because, taken together, we see that these verses don't just teach us that our worship should involve "Lips that Praise God," but also...

LABORS that PLEASE GOD

And it's quite interesting to see just what kind of labors God has in mind. And what those labors confirm or deny about the sincerity of our lips. Lips and labors. These are the instruments of our worship. To be continued...

Let's pray...

¹ Miroslav Volf, "Worship as Adoration and Action: Reflections on a Christian Way of Being-in-the-World," *Worship Adoration and Action*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 207.

² Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 611.

³ F. F. Bruce, 384.

⁴ Phillips, 612.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dennis E. Johnson, "Hebrews" in *Hebrews-Revelation* (ESVEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 209.

⁹ "Burnt offerings were to be offered daily to the Lord under the old covenant (Exod 29:38-42), and in the same way praise is to be offered as a sacrifice continually." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (BTC; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 423.

¹⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (BST; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1982), 260.

¹¹ Ibid., 260. Italics his.

¹² People familiar with the King James Version might remember that it reads "the calves of our lips." The Hebrew (MT) uses a word for "bull" but the Greek translation (LXX) uses the word for "fruit." Most English translations follow the LXX, reading "fruit of our lips," because the author of Hebrews consistently draws on the LXX and the LXX probably reflects a better understanding of the MT. Not the *mem* at the end of an archaic case ending.

¹³ Johnson, 209-210.

¹⁴ Brown, 261.

¹⁵ "It is one thing to express one's indebtedness to God; it is quite another to allow other people to know how much he means to us. In a spiritually ignorant society, like our own, regular attendance at Christian worship presents the Christian with an opportunity to witness. As we too offer *the fruit of our lips*, people with no clear faith may become aware that we too *acknowledge his name*." Ibid., 261.

¹⁶ This is not an original illustration to me, but I have forgotten where I first encountered it.

¹⁷ Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 1334.