

“Our Sacrifice of Thanksgiving and Praise”

Mark 12:28-34
Hebrews 9:11-14
Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:11-14

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Materialistically, would you rather have A, which is alright, or B, which is the best of the best? Now, let's say you acquire B, what will you do with it? How will you treat it? Would you tell others about it? Would you think about it? Would you let it out of your sight?

Now, let's think spiritually. Would you rather have A, which has some promise and is temporal and unsure, or B, which is the best of the best; full of promise, eternal, and as sure as it gets? Now, let's say you acquire B, what will you do with it? How will you treat it? Would you tell others about it? Would you think about it? Would you ever want to be separated from it?

In a nutshell, what this text in Hebrews is relaying to us is that the sacrifices of the first covenant were good and important to note for that time, but “how much more” says the writer, is Christ's sacrifice, which is the bedrock of the new covenant between God and God's people.

Anytime communication contains the term “but”, you want to pay attention. In just about every case, when you come across this term in a sentence, it is negating the statement previously made and placing focus on what is coming next. It is a term most often used to compare and contrast. The lesson we may learn can be found in what comes before the “but”, but what comes after is usually what is most important.

If the sacrifices made to God, every year on Yom Kippur, the Day of the Atonement, when the high priest in Jerusalem would take the blood of the animal sacrifices in the temple courtyard and sprinkle it in the temple's inner sanctum was the way to be sanctified and purified, and reconnected with the Holy One, then “how much more” will Christ's sacrifice of his flesh and blood, as the Son of God, made on our behalf, sanctify and purify?

The two don't compare. The writer of Hebrews was challenging his audience to focus on that which is more.

Christ is more! More than what? More than us. More than anything we can ever be. More than anything we could ever do. More than any of the greatest sacrifices made in the temple on Yom Kippur.

- A. The sacrifices and offerings of the people were temporal, requiring repetition and annual renewal, *but* Christ, with his own blood, obtained eternal redemption; permanent and complete; not just once for one, but done once and for all.
- B. The "regulations for worship" of the first covenant were reserved for the earthly sanctuary or the first tent (tabernacle), *but* Christ's ministry occurs in a greater and more perfect tent. In other words, the sacrifices of the first covenant had to be done in a holy place, namely the tabernacle or temple in Jerusalem, and at designated times, *but* with Christ's sacrifice, the human and the divine coincide and intersect. With Christ's sacrifice, done once and for all, God in Christ could now be worshipped anywhere and anytime; whenever Christians gather at a table and break bread or live in remembrance of him.
- C. The sacrifices of the people in the first covenant were done visibly and for external purification, *but* Christ's sacrifice, and only Christ's sacrifice, offers the internal purification of our conscience.

Even with a contrast spelled out, it is important that we know Christ's work was done within the framework of the Jewish faith, not in opposition to it. Christ laid down his life as the ultimate sacrifice in the same way the animals were sacrificed. Christ laid down his life as the ultimate sacrifice so God's people (and animals) no longer had to suffer. But why we might ask? Couldn't we have just continued on in the routine of the first covenant and once a year bring our animals to be sacrificed on the altar? I suppose, but God had so much more in store.

At the close of verse 14, the writer of Hebrews gives us insight as to why God would have sent Jesus and why his sacrifice was necessary; "to allow believers to worship the living God." You see, even though those during the age of the first covenant believed they were worshipping God by their ritual sacrifices, complete worship was not being fulfilled. God desired more focus, more attention, more glory, and more thanksgiving and praise. So, what did God do? God gave us the best of the best, the ultimate sacrifice, to build a bridge and make a way for us to worship God fully.

So, what might this mean for us? Through Christ's sacrifice, a way is made for us to offer **our sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise**. What does that mean? Let's break it down with whom, when, where, how, and why...

Whom should we give thanks and praise?

Our God, the Lord, who is above all we can imagine, and who surpasses all the false gods and earthly rulers who will eventually fade away.

When should we give thanks and praise?

As long as we have our being. From our first breath to our last.

Where should we give thanks and praise?

God is everywhere, and therefore, wherever we are. We aren't called to live in darkness; therefore, we aren't meant to try and hide from God. Since God is everywhere, I don't think hide and seek is a good game to play with God. God is the best seeker ever because God is everywhere and because God never gives up seeking.

How should we give thanks and praise?

The Great Commandment should be the first place we start in asking how. Love God with everything we are and everything we have and everything we do. Love our neighbors. Everything we do should begin with those two thoughts. Before we do something, or even say something, does it represent our love for God and the call to love our neighbor. If it doesn't, or even if there is a question, we shouldn't do it or say it. We must all admit we can be better at this!

Then, as a continuation of our love for God and others, we need to not only give thanksgiving to God, we need to do some "thanks-living" for God. How do we do that?

We can offer the sacrifice of ourselves and give our bodies back. This symbolizes our willingness to die to all our ways and offer every part of ourselves to God. To do this, we must step up to the plate voluntarily, willing to be completely present, and ready to fully commit.

We can offer the sacrifice of our praise. We are to offer praise continually. Praise to God doesn't commence at a worship service in a church building; instead it continues there. One commentator suggests, "The reason some of us do such a poor job of praising God corporately is that we have not been praising God privately." Each day we are called to live in a continual attitude of praise.

We can offer the sacrifice of our thoughts and desires through prayer. Another commentator suggests, "The deepest longings of our hearts are met in the Holy of holies with our Lord. But to enjoy this sweet communion we must first come to the brazen altar of sacrifice, then to the golden altar of prayer; prayer based on the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ." Prayer draws us closer to God and God's will. Prayer keeps us connected with God in all times, places, and circumstances. Our very lives are called to be one continuous living prayer.

We can offer the sacrifice of our possessions. Does our giving show what we think of God? “Throughout the ancient world, both in Judaism and in many forms of Greco-Roman religious life, sacrifice played an important role within various ritual structures. This activity was more sophisticated than we sometimes imagine it to be; these were not simply superstitious people imagining that their anthropomorphic gods would not be placated until the correct smells wafted up from the altars. Rather, the ritual of sacrifice was a means of enshrining, within a highly structured practice, a broader theological concept with which we are all familiar: the idea that everything ultimately belongs to God. When we return to God some small portion of what we have (whether it be grain or animals or time or money), we are underscoring our belief that what we have is not actually ours. It already belongs to God, and we return a portion of it to God as a sign and reminder of that reality.” (David Cunningham, FOTW, 256)

Our sacrifices today do not make use of the blood of goats and the ashes of a heifer; but just as those were valuable assets in an agricultural economy, so do we do something similar when we sacrifice time, money, and energy. Does our giving of time, money, and energy show what we think of God?

We can offer the sacrifices of our purity. This is not language we use very often, but ultimately it is asking us if we are washed in the blood of the lamb. Have our sins been washed away? Have we turned to God to confess our sins and shortcomings in trust that God will forgive us?

Why should we give thanks and praise? “Because.” We have all heard, and also said, the infamous line when a child asks about going somewhere, doing something, or having something to eat. The first answer they have been given is no. Soon, the persistence begins with asking “why can’t they” and after about the 6th rapid fire of “why”, the only remaining answer plausible to say anymore is “because I said so, that’s why.” In truth, when it comes to giving God thanks and praise, we know the reasons “why”, don’t we?

Because... Christ is more.

Because... God is faithful and keeps faith forever.

Psalm 146 in its entirety is a call to worship; an invitation for us to live our lives, our whole lives, in celebration of God and as reflections of God. It is about a life committed to praising God. A God, who alone is worthy of our soul’s trust and gratitude; our source of life and deepest sense of joy, in whom we are called to live, move, and have our being; who is known for providing what the needy lack. So, why do we praise God?

Because... God executes justice for the oppressed. *This is something earthly rulers have never been able to accomplish.*

Because... God gives food to the hungry. *Not just bread for our rumbling stomachs, but spiritual nourishment for our souls and spirits.*

Because... God sets the prisoners free. *This is not letting people in prison off the hook. This is about releasing us from any shackles and chains that bind us.*

Because... God opens the eyes of the blind; healing us in body, mind, and spirit.

Because... God lifts up those who are bowed down.

Because... God loves the righteous.

Because... God watches over the strangers.

Because... God upholds the orphan and the widow; *including all those who may be nudged to the margins of society.*

Because... God brings the wicked to ruin.

Because... God is great and merciful; mighty in being and action.

Because... God reigns forever.

Every sacrifice we offer is simply giving back to God what God has already done for us. We give to God because God first, and abundantly, has given unto us.

As we think about our sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise, I would like to offer us two warnings: 1. We must be cautious not to allow our frequently repeated gestures to lose their meaning and significance. We must not find ourselves simply going through the motions, having forgotten what we were originally intending to signify by our various acts of sacrifice and worship. We must think to ourselves, are we in danger of just going through the motions? Have we fallen into the trap of ritual repetition without meaning? 2. We ought not to let our own sacrifices loom too large in our imagination, as if the salvation of the world depended on us. Only the sacrifice of Christ is definitive and eternal. Even with the greatest of gifts given, Christ's sacrifice is always greater. For his is a sacrifice on behalf of all people and for all time.

As we close: What would you do "in honor of" or "in memory of" someone who gave their life for you? Tattoo? A big "In memory of" sticker in the back window of your car? A significant donation of money given on their behalf, so their legacy would live on in a program or a building or a scholarship? More importantly: *Would your life change? It would have to, right? How could your life not change when you have been saved because of someone else's sacrifice? Would you think about things differently? Would you treat people differently? Would you act differently? Would you approach each day of your life with a different perspective?*

How will we live in thanksgiving and praise, "in honor of" or "in memory of", the one who sacrificed it all so we could have more?

To God be the glory... Let all God's people say... amen.