

Introduction:

What does it mean to show someone appreciation? Well, the simplest way is, of course, to verbally express your thanks to them, just to acknowledge your gratitude for their gift or service. If someone opens the door for you, or helps you carry something, or gently lets you know that you have a small piece of strawberry pop-tart stuck in your beard, it's completely appropriate to tell them "thanks!" Sometimes if that thing, or deed, or service is especially nice or generous, we may even give them a token of our thanks, such as writing a card. For those of you getting ready to graduate or getting married, you will spend a great deal of time in the near future writing thank you cards to all of those people who supported you through cards and gifts. It's a simple but powerful way of showing your appreciation.

But there are other ways of showing thanks as well. I believe that we can show appreciation to others in the way that we live our lives and the choices that we make. For example, we may show appreciation to our spouses by choosing to help them out with chores around the house without being asked or without expectation of reciprocation. We may choose to show appreciation to a teacher or mentor or friend by taking the advice that they gave us and trying to live differently or better. We may show thanks or appreciation to our parents by honoring and obeying the rules they set out for us.

How is it, then, that we show thanks to God? Much of what we do in the church worship is a way of showing thanks to God. We sing songs of praise, we offer our monetary gifts, and we share our talents, such as singing, as a way of giving back to God for all of the things that He has given to us.

We have reached the end of our series on the Book of Hebrews, and some of you might be thanking God to yourselves right now. The author of Hebrews has spent a great deal of time explaining to His audience that Jesus is our new High Priest and the perfect sacrifice for our sins; it is only appropriate that the book ends with a call for us to offer our thanks to God for what He has done on our behalf. And the thanks, in this case, is called a "Sacrifice of Praise."

Sacrifices and offerings, in the Old Testament were extremely complex and were often made as a way of removing the punishment of sin from the person or people. As we've discovered throughout the book of Hebrews, Jesus functions as a new and final sacrifice for the sins of the people, once and for all, that removed both the punishment and guilt of sin from anyone who would call Him Lord and Savior. The laws related to the performance of the Sacrifices and the ways in which the people were to live as a people of God were recorded in the Torah, taught in the temple, and memorized by the people. But the laws themselves wouldn't save the people, and they were written on destructible tablets of stone. However, Jeremiah prophesied, which the author of Hebrews later quotes, that there would be a time where the law would no longer need to be written on stone, but rather under the new covenant it would be written on the hearts of the people.

Jeremiah 31:33

³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This new covenant that Jeremiah described was signed and sealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It was heavily detailed throughout the Book of Hebrews, how Jesus is the new and better high priest as well as the new and better sacrifice. And now that animal sacrifices are no longer required to maintain the covenant with God, the author of Hebrews concludes the book by suggesting a new and different type of sacrifice: A Sacrifice of Praise.

Focus Scripture: Hebrews 13:15

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.

So, now that we have been saved by Jesus and are a part of this new covenant which promises us eternal life with God, we are called to offer a sacrifice, which is really a reversal from what had been done before. According to God's covenant with Moses, the people had to first make a sacrifice, and then they would be right with God. Now the people are made right with God, through Jesus' sacrifice, so then they make a sacrifice. And what is this sacrifice? We are told that it is the "fruit of the lips that acknowledge his name," meaning that it is the good things that come out of people who call on Jesus as Lord.

Transition: Much of this final chapter of Hebrews details what our Sacrifices of Praise to God might look like. In fact, we are given nine examples of sacrifices of praise in this passage. Let's go through them, and as we do, consider how it is that you have been or could give thanks to God in your life through these sacrifices of praise.

What is our sacrifice?

Do Good-v. 16-"Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." This is the foundation of the sacrifice of praise; it is living in such a way that our good deeds are as worship to God. All of the other things to come are really just examples of this "doing good."

The next four examples of "doing good" are all entwined in the Christian principle of showing LOVE to others. They are Love for Each Other, found in v. 1, Love for Strangers, found in v. 2, and love for the imprisoned and love for the oppressed, both found in v. 3.

The sacrifice of praise is founded on our good deeds, that must all be done in love, which is a reflection of the character of God. In John's telling of the last supper, Jesus had just finished taking the place of a servant by washing his disciples'; he then identifies Judas as the traitor and sends him away to do his business. And he gives this curious command for them to love one another:

John 13:34-35⁻³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

It's interesting to me that Jesus calls this a "new command;" Leviticus 9:18 says "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." They knew that this was a part of the law. I think what is "new" about this command is while the Jews would've been identified by their obedience to the law, Christians should be identified by their love for one another. How well do we show love to our fellow believers? How well do we show love to strangers, to those outside the faith, to the prisoner and those generally looked down on by society, to the oppressed and those generally scorned by society?

You see, Christian love is not the modern wishy-washy word meaning that we can send good feelings and vibes to people around us, all while remaining in our own spaces without ever interacting with our fellow believers, strangers, prisoners, and the oppressed. In Matthew 25, often referred to as the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus tells us that it is those who physically show love to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, stranger, and prisoner that will enter the kingdom of heaven. Have you ever considered that the way in which you treat people you don't know is directly how you treat Jesus?

The next three examples of "Sacrifices of Praise" have to do with showing appreciation for what God has given to us. First we are called to be Sexually Pure in v. 4. Our sexuality and expressions of sexuality are a gift given from God, but we are also called to high standards when using that gift.

The Israelite religion had extremely strict sexual purity laws. These were especially important as the other cultures and religions surrounding them were very free and immoral with their sexuality, and God wanted the Israelites to be a people set apart. Marital faithfulness, then, was really important in the law. The reality is that the ways in which we exercise our God-given sexuality, whether we are single or married or somewhere in-between, are a sacrifice of praise to God.

Secondly we are called to be Content and Satisfied with the gifts that God has given to us of money and possessions. V. 5 says ⁵ "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have."

Everything that we have has been given to us in some way by God. And we should learn to appreciate it and use it wisely. But we are also reminded by Jesus that possessions and money are only temporary and don't give us eternal satisfaction.

Matthew 6:19-21- "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Finally, we are told in v. 17 that we have been given spiritual leaders to help guide us in our Christian journeys, and so we should appreciate this gift by following and obeying what they teach us.

Obedience to Spiritual elders is a theme throughout Scripture. Paul tells us in **1 Thessalonians 5:12-13**: "But we ask you, brothers, to acknowledge those who work diligently among you, who preside over you in the Lord and give you instruction. In love, hold them in highest regard because of their work."

The final sacrifice of praise is that we are called to patiently endure suffering when living as a faithful witness to the world around us in the same way that Christ suffered reproach from those he came to save as found in v. 13. This is very much in line with what Jesus tells us in **Luke 9:23**—"Then Jesus said to all of them, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me."

IMITATE CHRIST

I'm sure listening to this list of "Sacrifices" is pretty overwhelming. You may be thinking, "I can do two, maybe three of those things, but my life is crazy enough already, how am I supposed to juggle all of this?" Or you may be thinking, if Jesus is the final covenant, better than the law, then why are we being given these new laws?

Ultimately, I don't believe that this is a comprehensive list of ways that we can praise God through our living. Rather, I think these are examples that can be summed up in a very simple maxim: imitate Christ. As followers of Christ, we are called not only to receive His salvation but to live into that salvation by becoming less like the world and more like Jesus. **1 John 2:5-6** says:

"But if anyone keeps His word, the love of God has been truly perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him: Whoever claims to abide in Him must walk as Jesus walked."

If we call ourselves Christians, living under this new covenant with Jesus, then we can't help but try to imitate Him, which means "doing good" in the ways listed and more! We need to remember, though, that this sacrifice of praise is not to earn our salvation; that has already been given to us. Rather, it is the fruit of a life dedicated to God, it is our response to His love for us. And will we struggle? Sure! And will we fail at times? Absolutely! But the point is that we are always moving towards Jesus, the center.

Transition: We are given this command to offer a sacrifice of praise, and we are given examples of what this looks like, with the ultimate conclusion that all of these things fall under the larger banner of imitating Christ. But in becoming like Christ, we are being called to step away from the safety and comfort of the world and into the uncertainty of a path set before us by a man who was crucified for living differently. However, we are not left to offer these sacrifices alone. In the same way that God's grace covers our sins, He also makes several promises to be present with us in our journey in imitating Christ.

1) What does God promise us? What are God's assurances to us?

The author of Hebrews includes an important historical promise from God to His people. In v. 5, he writes of God "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He is actually quoting God's words to Joshua in Deuteronomy 31:6. God was preparing Joshua to take over for Moses. Then these words are repeated in Joshua 1:5. Moses had just died and Joshua was about to assume command of the Israelites and lead them into the Promised Land; he knew that he was going to face many terrible and fierce enemies, and God calls for him to be brave and courageous, promising to stay with him through any future trials. We see these beautiful words in **Joshua 1:9** "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not

be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” What amazing love, that the God of the universe wants to be with us. Now, this isn’t a promise that everything will be easy for us or safe for us in this life; but it is a promise of constant, unrelenting presence.

3) In light God’s promises, then, what should our attitudes be? Ours should be an attitude of trust, that if we are “doing good” as a pleasing sacrifice to God, then our God will sustain us. V. 6 says “So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

Now remember that the author of Hebrews does talk about the suffering that Jesus endured, and he alludes that if we imitate Jesus we may suffer the same reproach. So asking the question “what can man do to me?” might not seem entirely helpful, remembering that man crucified Jesus. So, how do we have an attitude of trust in God, knowing he is present with us, but also knowing that even with His presence we may suffer? Jesus answers this for us in **Matthew 10:28**, that our trust in God is a trust that He has ultimate, final power in the world and though we may face suffering in this life, we can still praise Him for his presence and that He will save our souls.

Matthew 10:28 “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

God’s power is beyond our understanding, but in all of His greatness, He chose to condescend to us in human form as Jesus, because He wanted to know, love, and save His creation. Through Jesus, our sins have been forgiven, and we have been made right with God. Because of this, we choose to imitate Christ by “doing good” and in so doing offer our lives as “Sacrifices of Praise” to God.