

Hebrews 13:17 "Leaders; Offer To God A Sacrifice of Praise In Your Ministry"

God instructs every one of His people to offer to Him a sacrifice of praise. The altar upon which we offer such a sacrifice is Jesus Christ through whom we enter into the presence of God and through whom we are declared not guilty because of His righteousness put to our account by faith in Christ.

Last week we saw what form this sacrifice of praise takes for the believer.

HEB 13:15-16 "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

The fruit of our lips is a fruit which the Holy Spirit first works in our hearts. Jesus brings this out in LUK 6:45 "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."

This is why the fruit of our lips is not just what we say to God or men, it is what comes from the heart which God sees very clearly. It is the heart which God wants totally devoted to Him. And in Christ we have His heart and His life given to us which must in turn be given back to Him through lives of faith and obedience.

And so the fruit of our lips is a fruit which speaks of God's truth in love and offers to Him our lips to tell a dying world of a God who has come into this world to die for sinful men, to reconcile them back to the Father.

It is a fruit that comes from a heart which has compassion and love for people who, outside of Christ, have no life. The same mercy and compassion which our Lord has for people, which prompted Him to come into this world, should be the same love and compassion we should have for people. His heart is to be our heart, because He placed that heart in each of His people.

We're given a description of the heart of man in JER 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

And yet this same God who knows our sinful hearts is also the God who turns our hearts to Himself.

EZE 11:19-20 "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. 20 Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God."

This is the fruit the writer of Hebrews brings to bear on what a sacrifice of praise to God is to be in our lives. It is a heart beating for Jesus Christ which now desires to be a faithful witness for our Lord both in word and in deed as we rely on His Spirit to live that life unto His honor and glory.

And as we live that life for Him we will not "forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."  
(Heb.13:16)

But notice what our writer does in verse 17. He describes a sacrifice of praise to God as we honor God's choice of leaders He has placed over us.

**Hebrews 13:17** <sup>17</sup> Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

This might seem like a strange place to bring this into the equation, but keep in mind that our writer has been speaking about spiritual pursuits, not carnal pursuits.

And those who are chosen by God Himself, who are responsible in directing the Body of Christ into Godly spiritual pursuits, are those leaders in the Church whom He has placed there for the edification and the building up of the Body.

And so in essence to honor those Godly leaders is to honor Christ. To dishonor those Godly leaders is to dishonor Christ Himself. Let's look at this verse in the NIV.

HEB 13:17 "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

This is one of those verses that might tempt some in authority to try and lord it over those in their charge. On the contrary, any

Pastor or elder or deacon who understands this portion of God's word understands that this a humbling and awesome duty not to be taken lightly and to be entered into with great respect for the office and the responsibilities that go along with it.

We are talking about Christ's Church. This is not the Pastor's church or his career opportunity to be in charge of a lot of people. These are the very sheep for whom Christ died that have been placed in the care of men whom Jesus calls out to watch over them, with the express purpose of helping them be conformed into the image of Christ to His glory.

This is why the image of a Shepherd is given to Pastors and elders. Peter talks about this in 1PE 5:2-3 "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

You might remember that this very charge was given to Peter by Jesus Christ Himself, when He told Peter to tend His lambs and shepherd His sheep and follow Him.

Peter was told that, though he was given the responsibility to shepherd the sheep, he too was a lamb who was to follow the Lord if he was ever to be an effective shepherd. There's a tendency for some shepherds to think that they are above being part of the sheep. We are all part of the same fold of Jesus Christ. It just so happens that some have more responsibility given to them by Jesus when it comes to leading the rest of the sheep.

But we're all to be following the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. And as we follow and obey, we are offering to God our sacrifice of praise. But let's take a closer look at this verse.

HEB 13:17 "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority..." This is not a request from God. This is a command. But we need to be careful here not to think that God is encouraging blind obedience as we'll see later in this verse.

But the reason God can make such a command is that He is the One who has placed this leader in that position. Now, some might say, 'well I don't think this is a very good leader. Sure he teaches God's word and he loves the flock and is a good example, but he's certainly not the Gen. Norman Schwartzkoff type with the

charisma of Ronald Reagan and the wit and brilliance of a William F. Buckley.

That may be true, but what I've noticed from my study of scripture is that God has a tendency to use the foolish things in this world to confound the wise. This is not to suggest that God doesn't place brilliant and charismatic men in leadership. But, I dare say, that is the exception rather than the rule.

Let me give you a couple of examples. There was a man in scripture who led one of the largest groups of people in the world at that time. He was given a great deal of responsibility to love and lead God's sheep.

And there were some who felt that he was not the right choice for the job. After all he was not a good speaker, in fact, when he was chosen by God he made the comment, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." (EXO 4:10)

Some suggested that he stuttered. But despite this God placed him over this multitude. On one occasion a group of people tried to overthrow this man because they didn't care for his leadership. Of course we're speaking of Moses.

We read in NUM 16:1-3 Korah son of Izhar..... 2 rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. 3 They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD'S assembly?"

They evidently felt that they had every right to lead Israel as did Moses. They were offended that this inept man would be given the privilege to be in charge of an entire nation. This grieved Moses because Moses wasn't looking for glory, he just wanted to be true to his God.

NUM 16:4-5, 9-11, 16 "When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. 5 Then he said to Korah and all his followers: "In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him. 9 Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD'S tabernacle

and to stand before the community and minister to them? 10 He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. 11 It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?" 16 Moses said to Korah, "You and all your followers are to appear before the LORD tomorrow - you and they and Aaron."

Well, tomorrow came and here's what we read.

NUM 16:28-31 Then Moses said, "This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: 29 If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. 30 But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt." 31 As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions."

Moses did not assume this position. He was not even looking for such responsibility when God chose him for this task. But when God chooses, His choice stands until which time He decides to replace him.

David touches on this when he wrote in PSA 105:15 "Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm."

Moses would not be a likely candidate to lead a nation and yet God stood by His choice of Moses and used Moses to His glory. It didn't make any difference that other men felt Moses was wrong for the job according to their own standards. God would raise this man up. And so, for Korah to question the choice of Moses, was in essence, to question God.

This is why God took the action He did in that case. But what about great leaders in the N.T.? Was the pre-requisite to be a great orator and have a stature which commanded attention when he walked into a room?

Again, this certainly wouldn't disqualify someone for leadership, but we do see that God would often use men who were not necessarily at the head of their class when it came to such attributes. Paul said in 2CO 11:6 "I may not be a trained speaker,

but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way."

Even Paul recognized that some people did not think much of his stature and his ability to preach. He says in 2CO 10:10 For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

But, it was God who called Paul out and it was God who used Paul to bring the message of hope and truth to the Gentile world. And so, when God calls His people to obey and submit to such men in the church it is not because these leaders are necessarily what the world would deem prominent. Rather, God calls for obedience and submission from His people because it is His choice and we must honor that.

"Obey your leaders and submit to them." What our writer here intimates is that there is a real authority which has been given to these rulers by Christ Himself. It is not an innate authority but a delegated authority given by God to faithfully represent Him in the Church and in the world.

This power is not arbitrary, but is to be used within the limits God has prescribed in His word. John Owen makes the point that the rulers are to be obeyed and submitted to in regard to the two parts of their duties which is teaching and ruling.

And, so far as they teach and rule according to the whole counsel of God's Word, they are to be obeyed and submitted to. Again, this is not an absolute authority. But it is authoritative to the degree that each Pastor and leader must not shirk that responsibility to rule well and teach truth. And if he does so, the Body is obliged to honor God as they honor His choice for leader.

A.W. Pink makes the comment about this phrase "obey and submit". "The word obey in our text means an obedience which follows a being persuaded: the mind is first carried along with the preacher so that it believes, and then the will acts. [The phrase] "submit yourselves" seems to us to have reference unto the spirit in which they were to obey -- obedience was not to be merely an outward act, but prompted by submissive hearts."

And so when the leaders' hearts are seeking after Christ and the church's heart is seeking after Christ, the leader will shepherd as he watches and protects and feeds the flock. And in turn the flock

will respond to the shepherd as they obey and submit to His leading and teaching as Christ has placed him over that flock.

But, so as not to allow the leader to take his position for granted our writer adds in verse 17.... "They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." (NIV) A little better translation would render this passage as, "for they keep watch over your *souls*, as those who will give an account." (NAS)

For any man who thinks this is only a job, I would remind him that God does not see it that way. Whether Pastor or elder God will have each man give an account for what he did with this duty and privilege, in the Body of Christ.

For those of us who begin to approach this understanding it is a very humbling and sobering truth. Every Pastor and elder has been appointed to watch over the souls of the people in Body to which they have been placed by God.

There is a great need in the Church today for men of integrity. When it comes to leadership there is no place for a haphazard approach to setting the example for the flock as they are watched over and cared for.

And as long as there is sin in this world, Pastors and leaders must be vigilant in guarding the flock from false teachers and their teachings. This does not mean that the flock is not responsible to keep themselves alert and in the attitude of learning and growing, like the Bereans whom Paul commends.

But, the ultimate responsibility for the Church falls on the shoulders of the leaders. If they are not able to teach and disciple, if they are not able to rule and equip the Body, if they are not able to be above reproach, then when they stand before God, and they will, they will give an account for their deeds or lack thereof.

This is why it is essential that leaders in the church take seriously the teaching of the word of God without compromise. Doctrine matters. And correct biblical doctrine is not an option. Much time is spent by both Christ and His disciples in the gospels and the epistles, not to mention the Old Testament, warning the church about false teachers and false doctrine.

For a leader to neglect this aspect of feeding the sheep by not studying to show himself approved and ready to make a defense to the world and the church, regarding the truths of Christ and His

redemption found throughout the entire bible, is to be derelict in his duties.

There are too many temptations to sugar coat and dumb down the message to a "Mere Christianity" paradigm so as to reach the widest audience possible with the "best success." That is pragmatism at its worst. Feed the sheep and do not allow them to become anemic on the Pablum of the world sprinkled with bible verses.

These are spiritually perilous times, as they were even in the early church, and we must be ready to carry on the work without compromise and in a way where we are not only dedicated to Christ but also to the particular church in which He has placed us.

When Paul spoke to the elders of Ephesus he said in ACT 20:28-31 "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. 30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. 31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."

It is essential for both leaders and the flock to realize the importance of the local Body of Christ and the role we each play in it so that the work can go forward and the Lord may be honored.

It seems today that many Christians throughout the world have very little allegiance to the local body. And there are a variety of reasons for that. But when Christ places us in a local Body, and places leaders over us, then that is where we should find our primary source for our teaching and our serving.

It's difficult for anyone to serve effectively if they are not committed to the Body in which God has placed them. And it is even harder for them to submit and obey leadership if they are not connected to one Body. It's unfortunate, but many Christians don't realize the safety and protection Jesus had provided in the local body where the leadership is committed to watching over their souls.

This is the reason our Lord instituted the Church the way He did, with leaders, and the Word of God as the standard by which they



rule and watch over the flock. To reject that which Christ has instituted is to reject His wisdom and Sovereignty.

And if the flock will not submit to Christ's wisdom as He has placed leaders to guide and teach, then only problems and chaos will ultimately reign. We see this in the church at Corinth and the church at Galatia where some were even trying to introduce a false gospel. We also see it in a number of the churches addressed in the Book of Revelation.

This is another reason our writer here in Hebrews addresses the flock in this verse and connects it to the previous thought of continually offering a sacrifice of praise to God. When the Body acts like the Body, which Christ has put into place, He is pleased with our submission and obedience and it honors Him. It truly is a means of offering a sacrifice of praise to Him as the Pastor and leaders keep watch over the souls of the flock and the flock in turn obeys and submits from the heart.

By the way, that phrase "keep watch over your souls" conveys the idea in the Greek, as Pink points out, "to watch with the greatest care and diligence, and that not without trouble or danger, as Jacob kept and watched the flock of Laban in the night."

For anyone aspiring to the office of Pastor or elder it's imperative to understand that it is a labor of love for the flock, because Christ first loved them. If it's not, then it would be better to pursue something else.

A leader in the church is not some position one attains to and then sits by waiting for people to throw accolades your way. A leader in the church is a servant who leads. It takes a great deal of your time and effort and love to be able to devote yourself to the flock, even when the times are hard and not apparently very fruitful.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote of the Pastorate by comparing it to the commission Jesus gave to Peter to feed and tend the sheep. He wrote, "[Jesus] could not give to Peter a more affecting proof of His confidence than by committing to his care the dearest object of His love. It is only those who truly love Christ that are fitted to minister. The work is so laborious, the appreciation is often so small, the response so discouraging, the criticisms so harsh, the attacks of Satan so fierce, that only the "love of Christ" --His for us -- ours for Him, can constrain to such work. Hirelings will feed the goats, but only those who love Christ can feed His sheep."

All of that is true by the way. And I've learned it first-hand. But I would not trade if for a life of ease. The work to which I've been called is a work God first did in my heart many years ago. It is His doing that I am here and I give Him glory for that.

Spurgeon loved his people because he loved Christ who placed those people in his care. It was often difficult for him, but God's grace was and is always sufficient. And this is why our writer ends this verse with the exhortation for the flock, "Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

I've always thought that phrase seemed a little strange. Most Pastors might be tempted to alter that phrase to say "Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage *to them*."

But, remember, it is the flock for whom Christ died that is so important to Jesus. That would certainly include the Pastor, but the bigger picture is bigger than one or two or however many are in leadership.

It is the flock as a whole that our Lord is concerned with which is why He encourages the flock to allow the Pastor to shepherd and teach and carry on with his responsibilities, so that the church may grow and prosper in their souls as they become more like their Savior.

He is saying that it would be to the detriment of the flock to hamstring their Pastor who has been placed over them to help them attain their sanctification, according to the Word of God, for which he has been called to be a faithful servant, handling it accurately.

How is this done? How is it possible to allow the Pastor to do his service for Christ and the flock, joyfully and not with grief? As a Pastor I can tell you that there is no greater joy than to see teachable hearts and hearts that desire to grow in their faith. There is a great joy to see what has been taught begin to come alive in the lives of God's people as they submit to the Lord.

To see unity in the Spirit and a common goal to reach the lost with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and then to see each member begin to actually step out in faith and begin to take their responsibilities to be servants in God's Kingdom seriously.

It's a joy to know that I don't have to feel that I have to tickle the ears of the saints with only what they want to hear. Those types of

people don't usually stick around for very long. And I'm thankful to all of you for encouraging me to teach the word without compromise. There is many a Pastor who is grieved because their flock wants only the fluff with little substance. It would be unprofitable for you to have a man or men who succumb to that temptation.

I am thankful that I am involved with a group of people who pray for one another as well as me. I can tell you from personal experience that the enemy works overtime on me as well as my family. Pray for us often.

One day I will be able to Pastor full-time. But I am thankful for all of you who give to Christ to help meet my needs and the needs of my family. Most Pastors would love to have a flock like this one. The Lord has certainly blessed in the last two to three years in that respect. It wasn't always this way.

But having said all of this I would never want to lull this flock or myself into thinking that we've arrived or that there isn't room to grow and stretch. There is much work to do and we must all understand our roles and responsibilities.

We must always take the attitude that it is Jesus who has called us out for a reason. That reason is to bring glory to Him as we continually offer a sacrifice of praise to Him with our lives. Don't wait to reach some unattainable goal before you consider serving the Lord. Today is the acceptable day for salvation and the day to step out in faith and ask the Lord, what would You have me to do?

It is the Lord Christ we serve. We have nothing to be afraid of. If God is for us who can be against us? May we together move forward in the Lord and determine not to turn back or to the left or the right.

GAL 6:9-10 "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."