Gifts that Please God

# Text: Hebrews 13:15-21;

# Key Thought: Let’s respond to God’s love every day with praise and good deeds.

# Intro

The book of Hebrews, like many of the NT letters, was written to encourage the readers in their everyday practice of faith. There are few passages to rival the great verses of the latter part of Hebrews for urging us on in our daily Christian practice. Consider these:

Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

“In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.” Heb. 10:35-37

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Heb 12:1-2 NIV

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. Heb 12:28

Admonitions such as these provide a needed emotional push for us to desire to serve God better, but the question is, “How?” How do we translate our desire to serve and honor God into daily life? What choices today honor God?

Now, I bet that when you saw the sermon title, “Gifts that Please God,” you thought I was going to talk about money and financial giving. Well, you can relax. That is not the topic of this passage.

Rather the writer of the book of Hebrews is going to help us with some very practical advice as to how we can please God daily. In this short passage that we read today, the writer recommends two other kinds of gifts with which we can honor and please God. We know about both, but we do not often think of them in the same way that the book is presenting them, and it will help us if we catch the writer’s way of thinking.

# Our Gift of Praise to God

## God is Worthy of our Praise.

If you look up the derivation of the English word “worship” you will find that it comes from an old word “worth-ship.” So, when we say we worship God, we mean that we ascribe worth to him. This basic concept of what it means to praise, or worship God is captured in the Old Testament in the phrase, “Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise.” (1 Chron. 16:25; Ps 48:1; 96:4; 145:3 NIV). In the New Testament, the book of Revelation picks up this theme.

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being." Rev 4:11. NIV

In chapter 5 of Revelation, the vision of John honors the deity of Christ by proclaiming the Lamb of God to be worthy of worship using very similar language to that used earlier of God the Father.

In a loud voice they sang:
"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" Rev 5:12-13 NIV

The first reason for praise is always fundamentally that God deserves our praise. Because of his holy character, because God is our Creator, because God is the God of love and mercy, because He is omniscient and omnipotent, because God has communicated with us and sent his Son; for these and so many more reasons He is worthy of our praise. We lift our hearts and praise to God because of who He is!

## Hebrews calls it our sacrifice of praise.

What does Hebrews mean when it calls our praise to God a “sacrifice of praise” (Heb. 13:15)? Certainly, the word “sacrifice” takes us back to the OT times when Jewish worshippers brought animals as gifts to the temple to be used as sacrifices on the altar. The animal being brought by the worshipper was at one and the same time an offering by the worshipper since it cost the worshipper something to bring it and it was a gift freely given to God. The heart of the Jewish worshipper was desiring to honor God with their gift.

So, in using the metaphor, “sacrifice of praise,” the writer of Hebrews means that we are to bring a gift of words of reverence, devotion and adoration to honor God. The gift is to come freely from hearts that desire to worship God. To give this gift, we will need to focus and put our heart and soul into our words and songs of praise, testimonies of thanksgiving and words of adoration. It may cost us something just as the sacrifices of old cost the worshipper something. Praising God as response to the love of God is the natural fruit of “lips that openly profess his name” (Heb. 13:15).

One of the great reasons that we bring praise and worship your Lord Jesus Christ is because of the salvation that He has purchased for us. God’s plan before time was that He would provide a way for us to be reconciled to himself. Jesus provided this way through the sacrifice of himself. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice, the writer to the Hebrews tells us;

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name.” Heb 13:15 NIV

Sometimes praise seems more sacrificial when we are going through tough times. We don’t feel like praising God, but He still deserves our praise and praising God when we are in the valley will lift us up and help us through.

## When we praise God, we fulfill a purpose for which we were created.

The Westminster catechism states, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” This tells us that one of our key purposes is to bring praise to God.

Peter also makes very clear that one of our purposes as the people of God is to praise him.

 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” 1 Pe 2:9 NIV

## The act of praise fills our souls with joy.

The Good News is that as we praise God, it changes us. The Bible gives us three word-pictures of this change.

1. The first picture metaphor is found in Psalm 63. Notice the contrast between verse one and verse five.

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Ps 63:1 NIV

This is a description of people existing in drought and thirst and as a result in famine as well. It is a time of leanness. But in verse two the writer experiences God's strength and power in his sanctuary. The contrasting result is in verse five.

 “My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.” Ps 63:5 NIV

 It represents a person living in a lush land filled with good food. It represents an overflowing heart. The first change God wants to make in us is to change our hearts. God wants to do something amazing as we praise. He desires to bring our souls from leanness to fatness from a time of hunger and thirst to a time of satisfaction.

1. The second picture that I would give you that shows what happens when we praise God is from Isaiah 12:2, 3

 “The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” Isa 12:2-3 NIV

Here we have a picture of a person who can draw water from an abundant source. In a land like Israel where water is scarce, this is a very powerful picture. But think of a similar spiritual promise that Jesus gave us in the New Testament. He told us that his spirit would be in us a well of water springing up into eternal life (John 4:14). His spirit would be a resource for bringing us strength. His spirit would bring us renewal. Our intentional words of praise to God are part of how God works this miracle of new strength in our lives.

1. The third picture that I would give you from the Old Testament is from Isaiah 61. In this passage the prophet is giving a picture of the purpose and effect of Jesus’ ministry upon our lives. Isaiah is prophesying that Jesus will have as his purpose:

“[To] provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” Isa 61:3 NIV

This description helps us understand what the Spirit of God wants to do in your life and in mine. This wonderful picture encourages us and tells us that the spirit of God will lift us out of our sense of mourning and replace it with joy. This does not mean we will never experience sadness or grief, for these are part of the human experience. But it does mean that our Savior can provide a balm, a healing, a renewal, for our hearts. He can lift us out of our spirit of dismay and apprehension and build us up. Then, instead of the ashes of discouragement, we will find ourselves planted firmly in his grace and growing stronger even as an oak tree grows strong despite adversity.

It is a wonderful thing that when we freely bring our gift of praise to God, he uses it to help us in return.

## Our intentional practice of praise

The writer of Hebrews is reminding us to think of praise as a great way for us to respond to the love of God, the generosity of God and to honor the character of God. Therefore, we need to be intentional about its practice both personally and collectively.

Jesus taught us to begin the Lord’s prayer with, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” So, we are to begin our prayers with praise.

I usually use prayer request cards when I pray to help me remember people I want to pray for regularly. But I have been convicted lately that I was just jumping into my list without praising God. I was not following the pattern given to us in “The Lord’s Prayer.” So, I stopped right then and filled several prayer cards with praises to God. Some listed attributes of God such as his compassion, his holiness, and his love. Some listed his kindnesses, reminding me to give thinks for present blessings. Now when I go through my card file list, I come to cards of praise mingled in and they remind me to spend time in praise too.

Being intentional about praise is also part of the discipline of the way that JoAnne and I design worship services and even prayer services. Most of my services have a hymn or chorus of praise and adoration at the beginning. Why? Because one reason we are here is to bring our sacrifice of praise. This is also after the pattern of “The Lord’s Prayer;” it is a good way to begin.

A third way we can be intentional about praise is in acknowledging God before others when we receive a blessing. When something good happens to you do you say you got lucky? Or do you acknowledge that you have been blessed? Just the language you use either takes the opportunity to give praise to God or does not use that opportunity. About the only time I talk about being lucky is if I’m playing The Farming Game or Ticket to Ride Europe at my sister’s house. The rest of the time, if something good happens, I have received a blessing. When we confess that God has given us a blessing, it is a sacrifice of praise.

# Our Gift of Good Works

## Changing our thinking about good works

The second way that Hebrews 13 tells us that we are to respond to God hardly needs to be emphasized in church, since we emphasize it a lot and we naturally think of it. But what is different here for us is the way of thinking about good works which the writer of Hebrews gives us.

Most often, when we think about good works, in the back of our minds, we are thinking at some level about merit. Many people, most of those who are not well-versed in the Christian way, think of good works as a way to earn salvation. But Paul tells us plainly in Ephesians that salvation does not come through our good works but by God’s grace.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. Eph 2:8-9 NIV

Others who are one step ahead, think of their good works as earning points for heavenly rewards. This thinking is technically correct since Jesus tells us that even one cup of cold water given in his name will be rewarded (Matt. 10:42). But is this the motivation that is the best and highest for us?

Here is the point at which this verse in Hebrews helps us. The writer asks us to think of our good deeds also as a sacrificial offering in response to the goodness of God to us, as a response of gratitude and worship for what Jesus has done for us. The writing is telling us to

give thanks and worship through our good deeds as well as with our voices and financial offerings.

## Reframing our motivation for good deeds

I think the Hebrew’s writer’s way of thinking is so helpful to us.

Think about the things that you do for those you love. You don’t do them because you will get things or actions in return, though you may. You do them because of love and because of gratitude for the relationship that already exists. You would not do those same things for other people without pay and maybe not even then. But because of love, you do them gladly. And usually we don’t even count the cost to ourselves because of love even though what we are asked to do may cost us quite a bit of time, energy and money.

That is the kind of thinking that considers our good deeds as sacrifices of praise to God. We need to reframe our motivation for good deeds. Our motivation needs to move past duty to love and worship. It is true that God rewards good deeds, but being motivated by love, gratitude and worship rather than rewards will be higher thinking and more powerful inspiration as well.

Three kinds of good deeds are specifically mentioned in the passage – sharing with others, prayer for others and respect for Christian leaders. But this is certainly not an exclusive list. Rather it just includes what was on the writer’s mind at the time for their readers. All different kinds of good deeds can be offered as sacrifices of praise to God.

## Offering your good deeds as a sacrifice to God

What would be good is for us to make a mental list of some good deeds that we personally need to offer as sacrifices of praise to God.

* Maybe you have been being kind to a neighbor who doesn’t return the favor, but you have hated doing it. A change of perspective would help you to offer this good deed as a sacrifice of praise to God simply because it is Christ-like.
* Maybe you have been doing a service for the church or for a community non-profit that no one seems to appreciate. Offer this service to God as a love gift. It will no longer be a source of irritation to you that no one notices. For Jesus specifically taught that God notices gifts given in secret and promises to reward them openly (Matthew 6:2).
* Maybe you spend time in prayer interceding for others. Often the enemy tempts you to think that you could get so much more done for yourself if you would only use that prayer time on your own projects. But by thinking with the writer of Hebrews you can think of your prayer time as also a gift to God. This thinking would provide one more encouragement to your intercession for others, for the church, and for your country if you thought of that time as a sacrifice of good deeds given willingly to the cause of Christ.
* Most of us have a difficult family member somewhere in the family tree. Frequently it seems like it takes more energy to get along with them that it should. The relationship is very one-sided with you doing all the work to keep things even civil. But you’ve been going out of your way to help that relationship out of Christian duty. Think of those good deeds of peace-making as sacrifices of love offered to God.
* Perhaps you are a nurse or a care-giver and you are going the extra mile for someone who does not or cannot appreciate it. But you know it is needed and is the caring thing to do. Offer those extra efforts to God as gifts of excellence, gifts of love, gifts of caring for the least of these. These gifts become sacred sacrifices of love to God.

Suddenly we begin to understand on a deeper level what Paul wrote;

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men Col 3:23 ESV

The word translated as “heartily” is literally “from your soul,” or we might say in English, from your heart. We would paraphrase as, “Put your heart into it.” We can do that so much better with all our good deeds if we think of them as sacrifices of praise to God in themselves.

# Concluding story

Grace Givers p. 215 “Ministering to Jesus”