

True Worship

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 July 2018

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] The reading is from Hebrews chapter 13 and it's on page 1212 of the Church Bibles. Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are ill-treated as if yourselves were suffering.

Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, because God has said, Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.

So we say with confidence, The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you.

Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.

[1 : 13] It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the most holy place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

Let us then go outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.

Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way.

[2 : 29] I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon. And now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead, our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will.

And may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly.

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you. Greet all your leaders and all the Lord's people. Those from Italy send their greetings.

Grace be with you all. This is the word of the Lord. Speak to God. Great. Good morning, St Silas. Great to see you here. My name is Martin Ezra. I'm the minister here. And it's great to have you here on this summer morning. We're still in kind of summer mode at the moment in July with lots of people away.

[3 : 36] And we've been praying for people, haven't we, on SU holiday. Just so people know what's going on. So we're doing the same sermon morning and evening this week. Next week we start a new series in the morning in Luke's Gospel.

And it will be the same sermon in the evening next week through July. But then from the beginning of August we get going with the different series. The series in Luke's Gospel in the mornings.

And then in the evenings we're going to be looking at what kind of a church is God calling us to be with a thematic series. So that's from two weeks' time. But this morning we finish our series in Hebrews.

We've been doing high-speed Hebrews. And we've got to the last chapter. If you could keep your Bibles open at chapter 13, that would be really helpful for me. If you're using the church Bible, it's page 1212 there if it's fallen closed.

And there's no outline on the notice sheet. But hopefully you'll see it as we go through. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we hear his voice in the scriptures.

[4 : 35] The Lord's right hand has done mighty things. The Lord's right hand is lifted high. The Lord's right hand has done mighty things.

I will not die but live and will proclaim what the Lord has done. Gracious Lord and loving Heavenly Father, as we turn to your word, would you speak to us and lift our hearts as we see Jesus.

Amen. Enable us to hear your words of comfort and words of challenge and be transformed into your likeness as we feast on your grace.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Great. Well, I don't know whether you've been watching The Crown, the big kind of Netflix series, Peter Morgan's historical drama, all about the Queen, looking at her early years.

And in the first season of The Crown, one of the big themes was about the relationship between the Crown, Queen Elizabeth II, and Prince Philip, her husband, as she becomes queen.

[5 : 38] And before that, you meet Elizabeth. She's still royal but she's a woman and she's married this chap who's in the Navy and they travel around the world with his work in the Navy.

And then he's renovating Clarence House where they think they'll live for years and her father, George VI, dies suddenly and she's catapulted into being the monarch. And the drama explores how shocking that is for their relationship between Philip and Elizabeth because it changes everything about their marriage.

And the big issue facing Philip is that his wife will never just be Elizabeth again. She'll never stop being the queen. It's not just a job that she can leave behind when she gets home.

Elizabeth, the wife of the Navy officer, has gone. And she has this new identity that affects her wherever she is and whatever she's doing. And there are lots of things that you can do in life that don't affect you anything like as much as that.

I was talking to a friend recently who wants to refresh his golf game. And the reality is that all he needs to do to get back into golf is just spend a few hours a week playing golf.

[6 : 46] He just needs to do that. And when he's not on the golf course, he'll be the same person. Whereas being the monarch, it's a whole life project, a new identity that she never stops being called to live out.

Well, here in chapter 13 of Hebrews, we see what a life of faith might look like, what the fruit of it could be. And it's clear from Hebrews 13 that being a Christian is a lot more like being the monarch than improving your golf game.

It's a new identity that should affect and permeate the whole of our lives being a Christian. The writers of the Hebrews, he's got no time for kind of Sunday Christianity, one day a week Christians, where we might feel, well, I go to church on a Sunday, but then I can spend the rest of my life just looking like everybody else.

As we get into these instructions, we find that new covenant life is wonderful, but it's a whole of life endeavor. The writer to the Hebrews has been urging us to, throughout the letter, to see how brilliant Jesus is.

And because he's so brilliant, to press on with him, not to drift away, to grasp all that God is seeking to bless us with in Jesus. And through Jesus, God has established this new covenant relationship, one that we'll celebrate together later in the service as we have the Lord's Supper.

[8 : 09] Jesus is the perfect priest who can plead before God his perfect sacrifice for us so that we are forgiven and we can look forward to perfect rest with God in the new creation.

And now the writer gives us this set of life applications that should naturally flow out of us if we've begun to grasp all that Jesus has done for us.

And the name of that whole life project is worship. If you look at the end of chapter 12, really the section we're looking at today starts at verse 28 of chapter 12, that very last verse of chapter 12, where the writer says, Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be

thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. That's like the headline that leads us into chapter 13, as we're called to worship God on his terms in the way that he finds acceptable. So what does it look like to worship God like that?

Well, we're going to see the marks of true worship, then the context of true worship, and then thirdly, how we find the strength for true worship. So first of all, the marks of true worship.

[9 : 25] We get the language of worship again in chapter 13, in verses 15 and 16, if you just have a look down. He says, Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name, and do not forget to do good and to share with others.

For with such sacrifices, God is pleased. You see that language being used again, like it is at the end of chapter 12, of sacrifice, of worship, old covenant sacrifice involved bringing in offerings, thanks offerings to an altar in a temple, and then being burnt up.

And that's fulfilled for us in what we say and in what we do, that we live lives that please God, and bear witness to his goodness, and we speak well of him, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

These are our offerings to God today. There's that famous quote that Christians often refer to. It's attributed to Francis of Assisi where he said, Preach the gospel at all times.

If necessary, use words. I don't know really whether he said that. But here we're seeing that actually, it's always necessary to be ready to use words.

[10 : 42] Yes, we preach the gospel with our lives, and we live differently, but our lips are ready to speak of Christ. We don't want people looking at Christians, looking at us and thinking, they're great people.

We want them to see, no, we're the same as them, but actually we have a great saviour in the Lord Jesus. And here in this chapter, we get specific examples of what that good life, that whole life worship might look like.

We're going to pick up four examples. The first one is love for the stranger. If you just look with me from verse one, he says, Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Love for the stranger. I was playing squash with a guy who was Danish. I was trying to make conversations, so I started asking him about hygge, you know, this word that we've started using in the UK, hygge.

[11 : 43] And he was, I said, what really does it mean in Danish? And this Danish guy said to me, the best picture he could have of hygge is that it's sitting around a fire or a wood-burning stove with close friends, being cozy and comfortable.

Now our problem as Christians is that lots of us translate the word hospitality, hygge. We read about hospitality and we think, oh yeah, get the Nigella Lawson cookbook out, invite around my best friends, serve the gin and tonic, put some jazz on in the background.

That's hospitality. So we look for a church of people that we like, who we'd like to have around for dinner and we'd like to be invited around to see them because they're very like us.

But the Bible word for hospitality is love for the stranger. Philo Xenia, love for the stranger. So if we're Christians with a heart for worship of God, we'll have strangers into our homes.

We'll spend time with people who are in need, people who are lonely, people who are vulnerable, the people who are harder to like. One of the encouragements for me recently over the summer, just taking stock of where we are as a church, when I'm meeting people in growth groups, it's great hearing how people have found that growth groups at times have been like that, a place where we're welcoming anybody as a group and seeking to love one another and finding a place where we look after each other.

[13 : 11] Love for the stranger. Next he goes on to sexual purity in verse 4. Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

So all of us, whether we're married or single, we worship God by upholding Christian marriage as a faithful union, keeping the marriage bed pure.

That is pure from adultery, from being between the sheets with anyone else who you're not married to, but also pure from lust for other women or other men. Not dreaming that you could trade in your wife for a younger model.

Not going to bed with your spouse with images in your mind from pornography. And if you're not married, the reality is that if you have sexual intimacy with somebody else, the memory of those experiences will linger with you if God calls you to be married later.

Then in verse 5, the writer goes from sexual lust into kind of money lust, if you like. He says, keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.

[14:22] So he hits both. And I've said this before, but I think sometimes in today's church landscape, you get some churches that are a bit stronger, quite good at teaching about sexual ethics, but don't seem to challenge Christians about the way we're handling our money and our greed and materialism.

And then we seem to find other churches that are really good at being distinctive about money and looking after the poor and being generous, but perhaps less strong on teaching the sexual ethics of the scriptures.

But the writer to the Hebrews, he hits both of those things, one after the other. And he nails it, really, when he talks about love of money, not love of things. Keep your lives free from the love of money. For the problem for lots of us isn't that we want to buy a sports car. I mean, you might do, but most of us are not really thinking sports car, yacht, cruise, being ostentatious.

When I worked, I worked as a lawyer. The law firm I was working at, and this is like over 10 years ago, some of the senior partners there were already earning a million a year. And most of them were not particularly ostentatious with their money.

[15:34] They didn't drive fancy cars. But that doesn't mean that they didn't love money. Some of them really loved money, but it was for the security that their money brought them. The prestige that it brought them.

The sense of them being in control of their lives, in control of where they live, in control of their future. It's an illusion. Money doesn't actually give you that control.

It doesn't actually make you content. But that's how we feel about money. And instead, as God's people, we're called to be content with what we have. That is that, as an act of worship to our generous God, we accept what He's given us, and we don't love money, longing for more.

Then, it's just worth me saying, as we think about money and we think about sexual purity, that this chapter is coming off the back of a letter that's talked about how in Jesus we have complete forgiveness for anything that we've done.

We have a new life in Him. There's no condemnation for anyone who puts their trust in Jesus. So if we're hearing commands like this and we're feeling burdened by the way that we've lived, we shouldn't feel like that.

[16:42] We put our trust in Jesus, He wipes the slate clean, and He gives us a new life to move on and live with Him. It's just that, having put our trust in Him, He calls us to something better now.

So we're not to feel condemned, we're to feel thankful and to look to live His way because we trust Him. We move on now to submission to leaders, and most of us as Christians, I guess, can think of another Christian that we look up to, we've looked up to in the past, maybe somebody who first told us about the Christian faith, who we wanted to kind of grab onto their coattails and be more like them.

And the temptation then is to leave that behind and think, well, especially if they're an older person from the past, that the culture has moved on now. We couldn't really be like them anymore. And so in verse 7, He says to us, remember your leaders, who spoke the Word of God to you, consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Jesus hasn't changed, and that way of life still makes sense, a godly, faithful way of life.

And then He comes back to leaders again in verse 17, and more particularly, He's thinking about our church leaders today in verse 17, if you have a look. Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority because they keep watch over you.

[18:09] In other words, they care for you. Sometimes they wake up in bed at night worrying about you. They keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

I think it's very striking that this strong command about the authority of leaders in church comes in Hebrews. Hebrews is such a strong letter on saying we don't need priests anymore to lead us into God's presence.

We have one high priest, Jesus, and any of us can access God anywhere. And then in chapter 10, we were told that we've all got a role to play when we gather as church.

Let us consider how we, all of us, may spur one another on to love and good deeds and encourage each other. So all Christians have these roles in church. And yet here, the writer is still assuming that church leaders are essential.

They're essential to speak and to teach the word of God, to be an example of life and faith, and to keep watch over us. And God says here that your church leaders are in a position of authority over you.

[19:16] We're to submit to the authority of church leaders and we're to aim to make their role, their job, their work of church leadership, a joy and not a burden. So these are some of the marks of true worship.

But why do we find this way of life hard? Why do we find it hard not to just hear commands like this and get on and do them? Well, that's because of our second point, the context of true worship.

And the context for those first hearers of the letter to the Hebrews was peer pressure all around them not to be wholehearted as Christians. And that's the same context we live in today.

Pressure around us not to live like this. Our society is thousands of miles from this way of life that's being described in Hebrews 13 and elsewhere in the New Testament.

We're being told to devote ourselves to lives of love and care and generosity. But we don't operate like that in the 21st century. I was reading an article this week about the trends in our culture about manners.

[20:21] George Friedman, who's this kind of top-draw geopolitical forecaster, his most commented-on article from the whole of last year was an article about the way that bad manners has become acceptable in the public square today in a way that it never was before with social media and trolling people.

And he said this, today, I would just put up the quote, today, we are surrounded by politicians who've decided that honesty requires that they show how deeply they detest each other and a public that feels free to display its contempt for any with whom it disagrees.

Our opponents have become our enemies and our enemies have become monsters. This has become true for all political factions and all political factions believe it's true only for their opponents. So just one example of the way that our culture is so different from what God is calling us to as God's people. He seeks us to worship Him by being completely counter-cultural.

But that puts us under pressure and it was pressure like that that was causing the first hearers of the Hebrew letter to drift. You can see that by the Old Testament passages that the writer quotes in chapter 13.

[21:39] So if you look at verse 5, when he's telling us and them not to be lovers of money, he says, be content with what you have because God has said, never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.

It's from Deuteronomy 31 and it was a command, well, a promise from God as he told Joshua to lead the people into the promised land because they were about to be surrounded by enemies. And in that context of opposition, God says, never will I leave you, never will I forsake you. Then in Hebrews, he goes on in verse 6, so we say with confidence, the Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid, what can mere mortals do to me?

Now there, he's quoting from Psalm 118 and it says this, when hard pressed, I cried to the Lord. He brought me into a spacious place. The Lord is with me, I will not be afraid, what can mere mortals do to me?

The Lord is with me, he is my helper, I will look in triumph on my enemies. So again, it's a psalm written by one of God's people facing lots of opposition from the people around him.

[22:50] And these are important verses because those first hearers, they were afraid to stand firm and live for Jesus against the tide of the prevailing culture.

And that's exactly the pressure that we face today, isn't it? We're told to practice hospitality to strangers, but when we see the people around us getting on with their careers and putting time into that, getting on with their hobbies and their busy lifestyles, our time feels too pressured and precious to devote ourselves to people who can't give us anything back.

We're told to honor marriage in Hebrews 13, but I was reading recently about a sportsman who was married and he's left his wife for somebody else who he fell in love with.

And the whole sway of the article was that he'd done the right thing. He'd done something admirable for being true to his strong feelings for this other person rather than upholding the promises he'd made before to his wife.

We're told to keep our lives free from the love of money, but that's hard when we live, most of us around, well, not most of us, lots of us at St. Silas live in some of the most affluent places in the world.

[24 : 06] We're surrounded by some of the most affluent people in the world and the people around us are, they're full of love for money so that if you're not worried about money and people see you giving away your money generously, people will worry about you, people who care for you because we feel that money is what gives us our security in life.

People worry that if you don't, if you're generous with your money, if you don't have enough money, you'll lose control over where you live, over whether you can send your children to the right school or that you won't be able to ever get on the property ladder or have the holidays that you want. And so that's the culture we live in and all the time, even if we're still putting our faith in Jesus, the temptation is not to be wholehearted in worshipping him, to build our lives on the things the people around us are building their lives on.

So how do we withstand the pressure? Well, that's our third point. We've thought about the marks of true worship, secondly about the context of true worship and why it's difficult, and our third point this morning, how we find the strength for true worship.

And I think there are two big ideas here. Feast on his grace today and set your hope on his tomorrow. So first of all, feast on his grace today. He points us back again.

[25 : 28] He keeps using the Old Testament, the writer. In the old covenant worship system, in the tabernacle, when you brought in an animal to be sacrificed and they burnt it on the altar, the priests were allowed to eat the meat.

So they would feast on the meat after it had been offered to God and burnt. So that's why we get these verses 9 and 10. He says, Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.

It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

What's he saying? He's using that picture of the priests being given that choice meat from the altar as a picture of the spiritual nourishment that's on offer to us as Christians from God, feasting on the grace of God to keep us strong.

And what does that look like? Well, it's about enjoying fellowship with Jesus, communion with Jesus every day. In chapter 10, we were urged to draw near to God with full assurance.

[26 : 36] In verse 5, here we were reminded that God is with us wherever we go. And here we're meant to appropriate that, make the most of it, feed our souls day by day with the rich food of knowing God better.

I don't know what you think about that, but I think that's a wonderful way of thinking about our daily Bible reading and prayer, that so often I think of it as a burden, as something I've got to get done in a busy day.

Instead of thinking, this is an opportunity to feast from the best meat from God's altar. And a key word as you read Hebrews is the word today.

It's a key word because in Hebrews it's saying every day is a decision day. What are you going to do today? Are you going to choose Christ today? Don't procrastinate in choosing him.

And for my money, the easiest things to procrastinate about in a busy life are these spiritual disciplines, meeting up with God's people for fellowship, praying to God, reading the Bible.

[27 : 38] Instead of feasting, Hebrews says, don't put it off till tomorrow. Do it today. A feast has been prepared for you. Come and eat, read God's word, pray, and enjoy rich communion with Christ.

So that's our first key to withstanding the pressure to drift away from Jesus. And we also find strength by setting our hope on his tomorrow. That comes in verses 11 to 14.

We'll look at them in a moment. You see, we live in a great city in Glasgow. It's a great city and we want to feel at home in our city. But when you live distinctively for God, it makes you feel like a bit of an outsider, doesn't it?

Whether that's in high school or it's at university or it's in the hospital or the staff room or the office or the neighborhood we live in. We feel an outsider because we look weird when we're not living like everyone else.

But have a look at verse 11. He says this, The high priest carries the blood of animals into the most holy place as a sin offering but the bodies are burned outside the camp.

[28 : 46] That's what used to happen. They burned the bodies outside. And how was it fulfilled?

Verse 12, And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

let us then go to him outside the camp bearing the disgrace he bore. So sometimes being a follower of Jesus will mean people around us make us feel ashamed or even disgraced.

But whenever we're treated like that we're following a saviour who did it first who roared into Jerusalem with people bowing to him as king knowing that within a week they were put him to death.

He would be rejected by the city and like the animals that foreshadowed his death he was taken outside the city and bore the disgrace of being brutally murdered on a cross.

And he did all of that for our benefit to be our once for all offering in our place bearing our sin. So that now if by standing up for him and living his way you look around at the people around you and you feel isolated for being a Christian you join Jesus outside the city and you enjoy your fellowship with him in that.

[30 : 08] He endured that for the joy set before him that he knew what was coming eternal pleasure with God and likewise for us we have to look ahead verse 14 for here we do not have an enduring city but we are looking for the city that is to come.

It's unshakable a perfect rest the city with foundations where we'll be with God forever and by looking forward to that unshakable future we like Jesus will be willing to at times be treated as outsiders in a city today because we know we belong to the city of tomorrow.

Let's pray together. Lord Jesus we praise you for who you are as we see you in this letter to the Hebrews. we acknowledge Lord Jesus your reign as the majestic sun seated in victory in the throne room of heaven that you are the true king who will one day soon transform this broken world into a city that cannot be shaken that you are the true prophet and in these last days God has spoken to us through you that you are the true priest who stands before the father interceding that we can draw near to him.

So heavenly father we approach your throne of grace together now. We acknowledge that you are a holy consuming fire but we stand in your grace and we ask that by your spirit working in us and through us we may keep our eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus this week and in the weeks to come and so worship you acceptably with reverence and all for the sake of your name.

Amen.