

Prayer

We thank You, our loving God and Father, for the infinite number of ways in which You are constantly working to make life on our planet enjoyable, adventurous and exciting; not just for Christians, but for everyone. Give us, Your servants, the understanding and sensitivity to take advantage of every aspect of life here on earth, and so prove to all our belief that You are a God of love. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Christ and Culture

Over the centuries, God has established His people, the Church, in many different cultures, and people have found the saving work of Christ in many different ways. The result is that Christian faith reflects many different human cultures, for good or ill. Pray today that God's people will be able to rejoice in their heritage of faith in Christ which transcends time, place and culture.

Meditation

Let the Spirit of liberty free your eager soul

To explore the wisdom and the love of God:

Let the Spirit of renewal inspire your willing heart

To give you the purpose and direction you need:

Let the Spirit of fire descend on the memory of your past

To burn spiritual rubbish and leave pure gold:

Let the Spirit of penitence touch your innermost being

To focus your life on the Lord, not on yourself:

Let the Spirit of compassion fill your considerate hearts

To love the unlovely and offer care to all:

Let the Spirit of unity burst into your consciousness

To remind you anew of your place in Christ's body:

Let the Spirit of prayer consume your waking hours

To refresh spiritual love for your eternal Redeemer:

Let the Spirit of God do His work in you now.

Bible Study - Hebrews 13:7-17

⁷ Remember your leaders, those who spoke God's word to you; reflect on the consequence of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. ⁹ Do not be swept along by all kinds of strange teachings, for it is good for your hearts to be sustained by grace, and not food which does not benefit those who live for it. ¹⁰ We have an altar at which those who officiate in worship have no authority to eat, ¹¹ for when the blood of living creatures is carried into the sanctuary by priests for the sin offering, the bodies of the animals from which this has come are burned outside the camp. ¹² For this reason, Jesus suffered outside the city gate in order to cleanse the people by means of His own blood. ¹³ Let us therefore go to Him outside the camp and bear the abuse He endured. ¹⁴ For we do not have any lasting city here, but we are looking for a city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through Him, let us always offer to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips which declare His name. ¹⁶ Do not forget to do good and share fellowship, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they watch over your souls and will have to account for them; in this way they can do their work with joy, and not with sorrow, for that would be of no help to you.

Review

This reading is a little strange, coming as it does almost at the end of the letter to the Hebrews. It begins and ends with advice to Christians about the value of leaders in God's church, and the best way to respond to them (13:7,8 and 17). However, in between these verses, the writer of the letter starts by making a point about not following after 'strange teaching' (17:9) which he illustrates by commenting about being sustained by 'grace' rather than food. This, then, leads him off into a long and rather difficult sequence which travels through the world of Old Testament sacrifices and back again to the proper worship of Jesus Christ.

The first advice is to follow the example of the leaders who first 'spoke God's Word to you' (13:7). We should remember that in the early days of the church, such leaders were often the great speakers like Paul, Barnabas or Apollos, and there was no question about the validity of their life, faith and example. These were people whose lives had shown fruit in the Kingdom of God, and they were to be considered as an example of faith. Moreover, such an example of faith would not fade, for as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.' In other words, the heart of our faith does not change; and in this context, it is quite easy to see why the writer goes on to say, 'Do not be swept along by all kinds of strange teachings.' Hebrews has been consistent throughout in opposing any new interpretation of Christ's ministry which is not rooted in the Old Testament, and it is possibly this thought which is in the writers mind as he now wanders back into the Old Testament in order to make his point about the unchanging supremacy of Christ and the praise which is due to Him (13:15,16).

In verse 9, Hebrews talks of the heart as being sustained by 'grace', not food. It is an odd comparison to make, unless we realise that in the old Jewish sacrificial worship of God, animals were killed, some of which were consequently used for food. Indeed, if Moses' laws were fully carried out, no animal was to be killed for food unless it was sacrificed before God. A careful reading of the first few chapters of Leviticus shows that whilst some animals were sacrificed and 'burnt whole' in worship of Almighty God, most were sacrificed as 'fellowship' offerings, and the meat was then given back to the people to eat, with a portion being kept for the priest. It is against this background that Hebrews says that the heart of a Christian is sustained by grace and not food!

In order to follow through his train of thought, the writer declares; 'We have an altar at which those who officiate in worship have no authority to eat.' (13:10), and then proceeds to explain that in the old system of the complete sacrifice of animals, or 'whole burned offerings', the blood was brought into the holy place of the Temple, but the animal was burned 'outside' (either the 'camp' or the 'city gates' of Jerusalem depending on the period of history). He links this thought with the fact that Jesus had died 'outside' the city of Jerusalem when offering His life as a sacrifice for our sins (Heb 2:17, 5:3, 10:12). The train of thought then becomes less clear as the writer attempts to make further connections with the scandal of Christ's sacrifice 'outside' the city (13:13) and goes on to explain that the only city that counts now is not Jerusalem, but the heavenly city, a 'city that is to come' (13:14). The last point, however, is very clear. Christian worship of the Lord is a 'sacrifice of praise'; and this is the only place in Scripture where you will find this famous phrase which is used in many modern hymns and songs.

Finally in this reading, Hebrews calls on God's people to submit to the authority of leaders, as an essential prerequisite for peace and harmony in the church. He identifies something which is painfully true even to this day, which is that if a church leader is unhappy and in sorrow because people will not accept his or her spiritual authority, then a church will not be blessed (the meaning of 'that would be of no help to you' in verse 14). The issue of godly leadership within the church is far bigger than the points raised here, and in particular the problem of false leaders and lack of trust. However, where good leaders exist, their example should be followed and their authority recognised, for this will enable Christ to do His work in the church. Despite the problems, this should always be our aim.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Does this passage of Scripture reflect issues of leadership which are relevant today, if so, which ones?
2. Discuss in your group the value of the Old testament imagery used in this text.
3. When you use the phrase 'sacrifice of praise', what do you think is meant? Is this an appropriate phrase to use in church today?

Discipleship

Taken the opportunity to think about your attitude towards church leaders. Who has inspired you and who has not? Why is this so? Bearing in mind that this passage says that your church leader has responsibility for your soul before God, try to make an appointment with your minister, vicar, elder or priest, to discuss with them how they exercise their pastoral oversight of you. This is something which should be of great importance to both you and your leader.

Final Prayer

Give me a voice, Lord God, to declare Your works, to preach Your Gospel and defend the faith. May I have the courage to do this for You alone and not give the impression that I do this to gain any heavenly reward, for I long to contribute to the growth of Your Kingdom; AMEN