

Text: Hebrews 13:10-13

Title: The Christian's Altar

Truth: Christ's saving sacrifice beckons us to come to Him.

Date/Location: Sunday March 4, 2012 at FBC

Introduction

There probably is a heavy Jewish component to the issue of food doctrines that were discussed in 13:9. Those teachings were opposed to the grace-based teaching of the (at the time) decades-old Christian faith.

Furthermore, those food teachings were not spiritually profitable to those who were "occupied with" or "walk in" them because they provided nothing like forgiveness of sins or righteousness before God. They could not help a person to overcome the flesh (Col. 2:23). Jesus taught that it was not food that defiled a person anyway, but the things in the person's heart were what defiled him.

Applicationally, we ought not to think that we are established or strengthened in our spiritual lives by food that is eaten or not eaten. We ought not be focused on food such that organic food stores and exercise become our preoccupation or even our religion.

I. The Christian "Altar," v. 10a

This passage is not uniformly interpreted, indicating it is not an easy one.

A. First we need to define some words

1. *We* means "we Christians." Some like Homer Kent (a good commentator, by the way) argue that it is "we Jews, in our Old Testament tradition." But that is unnatural given the present tense of the verb "to have." The OT altar has been outmoded by the sacrifice of Jesus, so it would seem that "*we had* an altar" would be more appropriate in that case.
2. If it is Christians that "*we*" are talking about, then the surprising statement is that we have an *altar*. What does that mean? It seems suspicious.

"We have an altar" does not mean that we have a physical, wooden or stone or metal altar upon which we make sacrifices. This carnal idea is promoted by other religions to this day who offer sacrifices or re-sacrifices. Our communion table is not an altar.

I do not believe *altar* refers to the wooden cross of our Lord.

Since we affirm from the Scriptures that there are no more sacrifices for sin after the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 10:18), we are free to understand that *altar* has a figurative significance.

The word is used here to reflect the whole concept of a sacrifice. In the Christian's case, the altar and sacrifice are one—Jesus Christ. He Himself is the offerer (the priest), the offering (the sacrifice), and the offering site (the place where the offering was made, in His body on the tree).

B. More about this Altar

The concepts of altar and sacrifice have to do with sin. The author of Hebrews has been laboring in his writing to get us to understand that the old covenant system could not take away sin with its repetitious sacrificial rituals.

Rather, Jesus Christ *does* provide cleansing and forgiveness from sin in a full and final way because of his self-sacrifice at Jerusalem.

Think about the folly of food-based religion with this in mind. Food eaten, not eaten, or sacrificed cannot take away sin! Only Jesus can.

So this *altar* that we have as Christians signifies the full sacrificial benefits of his death. That is what we have.

Transition: Now that we have that in mind, what do the Jews have?

II. The Jewish Altar, v. 10b-11

A. The next statement is that the Jewish priests serving in the tent (tabernacle) have no right to eat of the altar that we (Christians) have. That is the fact stated by the text regarding the Jewish priests who participate in the sacrificial rituals of the old covenant.

Note: 1 Cor. 10:18 informs us that people who eat of the altar share in it – what it means, in other words, its benefits. The altar of Israel offered forgiveness of sins, albeit temporary and not cleansing the conscience. The fact that the Jewish adherent cannot eat of the Christian altar means that they cannot share in its benefits.

B. Why do they have no right to the Christian altar? I would initially speculate that it is because they reject Christ, they have no right nor access to the sin-cleansing benefits of his sacrificial work. They mistakenly think their altar is still sufficient to deal with sin.

C. But the text goes on to give an explicit reason why they cannot eat of our altar: They cannot eat of our altar because (note *for* at the beginning of v. 11, untranslated by NIV) they cannot even eat of their own altar with respect to those sacrifices that are offered there!

1. In particular, the discussion is limited to those sacrifices where the animal blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin. Which sacrifices are these? Are all the Jewish sacrifices the same in this regard? Or are we only talking about a subset of them?

Initially we would think that it must be a subset of sacrifices, because the priests could eat the meat as part of their support for doing the priestly ministry (Leviticus 6:25-26, 1 Cor. 9:13). In fact, the people would eat some of their offerings, according to Deut. 12:27.

This initial thought is substantiated by verses from Leviticus 16, particularly verse 27. This is what the author of Hebrews has in mind. The Jews, when offering the “big sacrifices” in terms of dealing with national and personal sin, were disallowed from eating those sacrifices. They are burned outside the camp, not to be eaten at all.

There is another ritual, that of the red heifer in Numbers 19:1-10, that involves the slaughter and burning of a heifer outside the camp. That is not in view in Hebrews 13.

2. The thought is this: they cannot eat of the Old Testament sacrifices that provided temporary cleansing from sin. They are forbidden from partaking by eating from the Day of Atonement sin sacrifices. They would think that way about *any* sin sacrifice that was sent outside the camp for incineration.

Transition: But Jesus is such a sacrifice, who suffered *outside the gate*.

III. The Prominence of the *Location* of the Christian Altar, v. 12

A. Think about this: the Old Testament ritual included taking the most significant sacrifices for the sin of the high priest and the sin of the nation, and burning them in trash pile outside of the camp of the Israelites. These sacrifices are serious business, as is God’s view of sin. The vehicle to which sin was figuratively transferred as substitute was cremated and made to disappear. That’s how bad and gross sin is.

B. Going out to that place would make you unclean (Lev. 16:28). It was the *last place* that anyone would want to go. It is associated with sin and judgment. It is a place of shame. It is associated with disgrace.

- C. God saw fit to kind of “fulfill” the type of the Old Testament sacrifice in this regard by having Jesus die on the cross outside of the city of Jerusalem. (No gospel text says this explicitly, but it is indicated in Matthew 27:32-33, Mark 15:20, John 19:20 with words like “out” or “outside” or “near the city”).
- D. His death was for the purpose of “sanctifying the people,” meaning to cleanse them from sin through His blood.
- E. Any Jewish reader would immediately recognize the connection being made: God is saying that Jesus is the replacement of the Day of Atonement offering, and the red heifer for that matter as well.

Conclusion, v. 13: Go Out to Jesus

The doubting Hebrews need a massive change of mindset to move them out of their Jewish altar thinking and to accept participation in the Christian altar. Since Jesus offers cleansing from sin, they have no right to “eat of Him” (participate in the sacrificial blessings) unless they go out of the camp with him, bearing his reproach.

That’s right: if you want cleansing from sin, you have to go to Jesus. Where does sin get finally removed? Outside the camp. Outside the Jewish system. Outside of animal sacrifices. It happens where Jesus is.

And yes, that includes sharing in his shame. He died the death of a common criminal and was humiliated as part of His suffering for sin. We will, if we accept Him, naturally share in that reproach as well. With sharing in forgiveness comes sharing in His shame. Perhaps that will include ostracism from family and society; ridicule from former friends, and rejection by influential people.

The world hates the whole notion of the sacrifice of Christ. Christians love the idea and would rather take the temporary shame than the eternal punishment for their sins.

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