

“The Same Yesterday and Today and Forever”

The Twenty-Fourth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 13:1-16; Leviticus 16:11-28

The author of Hebrews will now bring his letter to a close. He is writing to a church going through a very difficult time of trial. We don't know where this church was (probably in Rome or possibly in Alexandria). Nor do we know much about the congregation—which likely was small and met in someone's home. But we do know that one pressing issue facing this church was that a number of their members had left the church and returned to Judaism. So, throughout the first twelve chapters of this epistle the author has made his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ. The creator of all things, and the redeemer of God's people, Jesus is far superior to angels, to Moses, and to the priests of Israel. His is an eternal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, and Jesus serves as priest in the heavenly temple, of which the earthly temple was a type and shadow. But as the author wraps up this epistle he issues a number of direct exhortations to those receiving this letter. These exhortations are well-familiar to readers of the New Testament. These include the need to love others (especially our brothers and sisters in Christ), to exercise hospitality, to have compassion upon those imprisoned (likely because of their faith in Christ), and that Christians must avoid all forms of sexual immorality. Yet, as the author goes on to point out, these exhortations only make sense in light of Jesus Christ's sacrifice for our sins.

We have spent some twenty-four Sundays working our way through this epistle, and we have but several more Sundays to go as we tackle the final chapter of this letter (Hebrews 13). I faced the option of rushing through the final chapter in one sermon, or else covering chapter 13 in two Sundays when there is not really a good place in the chapter to divide the author's concluding remarks. So, I decided to cover the first half of chapter 13 (vv. 1-16) this time, and then, Lord willing, we will conclude our series next time.

As we saw during our study of Hebrews 11, the author gave us a redemptive-historical survey (the so-called “hall of faith”) to make the point that a number of Old Testament figures (some of whom on the list surprise us) were looking ahead to the fulfillment of God's covenant promise. That covenant promise is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is, as we read in chapter 12, the founder and perfecter of faith. In light of the fact that God's gracious covenant promise is fulfilled in Christ, the author exhorts us to run the race (live the Christian life) all the while keeping our gaze fixed upon Jesus Christ at the finish line. As sons and daughters of God (because of Jesus who is our mediator), we must endure the race, and at the same time grow to appreciate the discipline we receive from our heavenly father who loves us and does what is best for us because we are his adopted children.

As we saw last time when we wrapped up our time in chapter twelve, God's glory was manifest upon Mount Sinai as he give Israel his law. Sinai shook and the sky was filled with the signs of God's holy presence—thunder and lightening. Because God's holy presence consecrated the mountain, the people were warned that none dare approach (human or beast). Terrified, the people pled with Moses to go up on the mountain, listen to the voice of God, and then come back down tell the people what it was that God had revealed. Apart from a mediator between sinners and a holy God, no one can dare enter the presence of God or withstand his holy voice. Because we are sinful, we risk being consumed by God's holy wrath should he approach unless a divinely-appointed mediator turns aside the wrath of God—that mediator is, of course, Jesus Christ.

And yet, as the author of Hebrews points out, as Christians we do not approach Mount Sinai, nor do we serve God under the old covenant with its sinful and weak human mediator in the person of Moses. No, the author says, we have come to a heavenly Mount Zion, a heavenly city (the New Jerusalem), and to the church of the living God (the church of the first born), whose members are even now enrolled in heaven. Because Jesus is the mediator of a new and better covenant, we have received a kingdom which cannot be shaken (unlike earthly kingdoms which will pass away when Christ returns). Because Jesus has died for our sins and covered our unrighteous with his perfect righteousness, it is with grateful hearts that we are now free to offer God acceptable worship with reverence and awe. As the author has pointed out, in every way, the new covenant is a better covenant than the old, because Jesus is a better mediator who offers better promises than God gave to Israel.

So, having made the point that all Christian believers are enrolled in the heavenly city and entitled to all the blessings earned by Jesus Christ, in chapter 13 the author now lays out a series of imperatives which flow out from the doctrine he has spent the previous twelve chapters explaining.

Because this is such an important point, a bit of review is in order. It is vital to understand the difference between the indicative mood and the imperative mood—if we hope to understand the distinction between the law and the gospel so as to understand much of the New Testament. An indicative is a statement of fact. The gospel is called “good news” because it is a declaration of something done for us—“Jesus died for our sins.” An imperative, on the other hand is a command—“Love, the Lord your God.” The law comes in the form of imperatives—“do this.” Indicatives are what we believe, imperatives are what we are to do. The gospel is what we believe and the law is what we obey. The order in which these two moods occur in the Scriptures is also very important. Indicatives precede imperatives. Believing the gospel precedes responding in gratitude by obeying the law. Get this distinction and order wrong, and you confuse law and gospel. You will turn Christianity into mere legalism—WWJD.

In the Book of Hebrews, the imperatives and indicatives are found throughout, but the imperatives of chapter 13 grow out of twelve chapters of mostly indicatives. Because of what Jesus has done as our eternal high priest, and as the mediator of the new and better covenant, in the closing chapter the author now directs us to live in a manner consistent with our profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Embracing Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant through faith means that we must act in a particular way because we have already been rendered “perfect.” Because we are “perfect” we are to do. We do not become “perfect” by doing.

The first imperative given us in chapter 13 is one which would be especially important in a congregation dealing with members committing or considering the sin of apostasy. In Hebrews 13:1, we are told, “*let brotherly love continue.*” Love for one’s family and kin was a mark of virtue throughout the ancient world, yet what made Christianity different was that brotherly love was to be extended beyond blood relations and intimate friends, to include fellow church members with whom the people of God share a relationship which can even transcend family ties—together we are all members of the body of Christ. Struggling churches can survive through the worst of times when its members love one another. But churches which appear to be strong can easily blow up, if love for the brethren be not present.

Remember too that the kind of love spoken of here is not the superficial show of affection and emotion so common in American churches. This sort of brotherly love takes the form of concrete action through an active diaconate, and in the exercise of the various spiritual gifts distributed among the church members. There should be no one in our midst going without the essentials of life. Those who mourn should be comforted. Those going through hard times should find consolation, aid, and counsel where

necessary. To put this in specific terms, do the grieving receive calls and notes of comfort? Do the sick receive visitors and get meals? Do we pray for those in need, and help them as we can? This is how brotherly love continues. This is what keeps a church strong in the midst of trial.

Next, the author takes up the subject of hospitality. In verse 2 he writes, “*do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*” The comment about entertaining angels unaware is very likely a reference to Abraham welcoming the three strangers as recounted in Genesis 19, one of whom is the pre-incarnate Christ. In its historical context (the first century Greco-Roman world), hospitality refers to Christians in one city taking Christian travelers into their homes when they arrived in your city. In the first century, there were no hotels and most inns were nothing but lawless brothels. It was important, therefore, to provide traveling Christians with a safe place to stay. The fellowship that resulted was an added blessing.

In fact, according to I Timothy 3:2, the willingness to extend such hospitality was a requirement to serve in office. But we also know that this practice was abused in the early church and the *Didache* (early 2nd century) even mentions that one of the sure signs of a false prophet is that they are freeloaders who overstay their welcome in someone’s home (more than three days), and who would not work in exchange for room and board. Given the huge difference in culture and travel between the first century and our own day and age, hospitality is more or less to be understood along the lines of generosity and friendliness towards Christian visitors.

The third exhortation is to “*remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*” Again, in its historical context, this likely refers to those members of this church who have been arrested and persecuted because of their faith in Jesus Christ, or because of debt brought on by either illness or personal circumstances—such people often languished in prison with no legal protection as we have today. But it is also likely that this exhortation extends to the care of any widows and orphans in the church community. Remember, there was no social security or government safety net in the first century. If a husband died, leaving his wife with small children, theirs was a very difficult circumstance. There was no such thing as retirement, so if you were past your productive years physically, and did not have family to care for you, yours was a very difficult existence. The point is that Christ’s church must minister to those who find themselves in jail because of their faith in Christ, as well as minister to those face difficult circumstances—such as widows and orphans. This is why we have deacons, and this is why we have a benevolence fund.

One area of conflict between the apostolic church and the pagan culture was sexuality. In the Greco-Roman world many men kept mistresses, and certain homosexual practices were widely accepted. So, the author has to exhort this church, “*let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.*” Christians are to be chaste and reserve sex for marriage—not before marriage, not outside of marriage, and not with same-sex partners. Ironically, we find ourselves living at a time of sexual promiscuity which would make the Greco-Roman world blush. The Greeks and Romans tolerated homosexuality, but would never have embraced anything like gay marriage because children were so essential to a first-century family’s survival.

Given the similarity between Greco-Roman culture and our own when it comes to promiscuity, we need to hear the author’s exhortation loudly and clearly. Gay marriage and homosexuality are not only a violation of Scripture, both are a violation of nature. But before we as Christians get too judgmental about how the pagans around us should behave, let us make sure that marriage is something which is honored in our own midst as a church, and that we hold marriage and family in great esteem. The best

way to deal with pagan sexuality is to practice biblical sexuality, and to honor the marriage bed.

Yet another area of conflict in which the contemporary world is much like the ancient world has to do with money. As we read in verse 5, “*keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’*” Again, money itself is not a problem, and God does indeed call some among us to be wealthy. Furthermore, there are people who are good stewards and are able to turn little into much through hard work and savvy. The issue is the **love** of money. If you don’t think this is a problem for us, remember we live in an economy driven by consumption and spending, not savings and investment. The love of money is a huge problem in modern American culture.

The reality is there will be rich Christians and poor Christians. The rich cannot claim some sort of divine favor or special blessing from God, and the poor should not see their circumstances as some sort of divine punishment. Indeed, both rich and poor struggle with the love of money. The rich have the burdens and worry of wealth and they fear losing it, while the poor foolishly think their problems would be solved if only they had more money. Instead the author of Hebrews tells us to be content with what we have. Add to this Paul’s advice and we should be willing to work hard, be good stewards of whatever God gives to us as a consequence, and then see all of our possessions (as meager or great as they are) as a gift from God. Furthermore, and we must be willing to share out of our abundance with those in need.

When the author reminds this struggling church of God’s promise that he will never leave them or forsake them, he is citing from or Deuteronomy 31:6, 8 (or even from Joshua 1:5) and is referring to God’s promise to meet his people’s needs and never to desert them in times of trial. We all know that there are times when God *seems* far away, but the reality is that this has far more to do with our own spiritual condition and lack of insight at the moment than it does with God truly turning us away, or rejecting us when we are in need. He does not leave us, and will not abandon us. He has promised never to do this. That thought, in turn, leads to the author’s conclusion in verse 6, “*so we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’*” This time quoting Psalm 118:6, the author’s point is that whenever we go through the hardships or experience persecution or rejection connected to our faith in Christ, God promises to be with us in the midst of these trials. Given God’s track-record in keeping his promises (as the author has been arguing throughout this epistle) we can say this with confidence—“the Lord is my helper.”

In verse 7, the author directs this struggling church to the example set for them by their own leaders (pastors and elders). “*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*” Three times in this chapter, the author will refer to the “leaders” who serve in this church. In verse 17, he tells his reader to obey them, and in verse 24, the unknown author extends his greetings to them (as though the author of his letter knew these men, and was known by them). Here in verse 7, the leaders are said to be those who preach the word—likely the pastors and/or those elders who teach. It appears as though the author knows that these men have been faithful under the most trying of circumstances, and urges those in this church to imitate them in this.

But since all men are sinful and will fail, Christians are also to consider that whatever limitations their leaders have, Jesus Christ has none of these weaknesses. In verse 8, we find the oft-quoted verse, “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,*” which is an obvious echo from Psalm 102:27 where we read of YHWH, “*but you are the same, and your years have no end.*” This not only a reminder of the deity of Jesus (who is eternal) but this fact should serve to comfort this persecuted flock. The God who does not change his will or his purpose is with us **today**. Since his track record in keeping his

promises is pretty good (“yesterday”), believers can rely on God under their present difficulties (“today”), and on into the future (“forever”). This gives us both comfort and confidence that our Savior’s priestly work avails for us now, and on into eternity. In the midst of a world of change, death, and suffering, Jesus does not change. He is eternal God in human flesh. He is also our high priest.

Because of the changelessness of Christ, the author can go on speak of the necessity of believing and defending sound doctrine, before reflecting upon the true meaning of sacrifice. In verse 9, he states, “*do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.*” Given the congregation’s Jewish past—where it was common make theological judgments on the basis of what people ate—the author reminds this congregation the folly of this now that Jesus has come and fulfilled the old covenant, rendering it obsolete. Christians are not to be taken in by those who teach “esoterica” and who make a big deal out of things not taught (or not central) in the Bible.

Echoing Paul—who said in Colossians 2:16-17, “*therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*”—the author reminds them that we are not strengthened by avoiding certain foods. Fighting over food only divides Jew from Gentile in the body of Christ. Rather, we are strengthened by that grace we receive through the two divinely appointed means—preaching and the Lord’s Supper which truly nourish our hearts (i.e., give us an increase in faith).

Instead of the types and shadows of the old covenant, we have all the blessings of the new. Therefore, the author states in verses 10-11, “*we have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.*” The author is now making an argument which is easy for us to overlook but which would have great weight with those considering returning to Judaism. There is no theological significance attached to food. Since Christ has come, animal sacrifices have ceased. In fact, on the Day of Atonement (as recounted in Leviticus 16:27—part of our Old Testament lesson) the flesh of the sacrificial animals was not eaten. The animal’s remains were taken outside the camp of the Israelites in the wilderness and burned. In all other sacrifices (when the sacrificial blood was not presented in the holy of holies), the priests were given the remains of the animals for food. Not on the Day of Atonement, however, because that sacrifice especially prefigured the sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross.¹ The Christian altar is not on earth, but in heaven. Therefore, we have a communion table (not an altar) and we use none of the symbols associated with the old covenant sacrifices. We have ministers, not priests. We emulate the Passover when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, not the animal sacrifices in the temple, or the tabernacle. And since the sacrifice has already been made by Jesus Christ who is now in heaven, we feed on him in our hearts by faith (not by mouth).

When we consider that on the Day of Atonement the sacrificial blood of animals was offered in the holy of holies, while their bodies were burned outside the camp, then we see the teeth in the author’s contention in verse 12. “*So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.*” Jesus was crucified outside the city wall of Jerusalem at a place known as Golgotha. His death did what the blood of the animals prefigured—his death sanctifies all those for whom he is dying. His death turns aside the wrath of God. His death sanctifies God’s people—setting them aside for God’s holy purpose—and cleanses their troubled consciences. The Day of Atonement pointed ahead to a

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 378-379.

crucified Messiah who died outside the camp (the city of Jerusalem), but whose blood cleansed the holy of holies (in the heavenly temple). Here again is a powerful argument for the truth of Christianity and for the superiority of the new covenant to the old. The Day of Atonement pointed ahead to the cross.

The ramification of this point for Christians becomes clear in verse 13. *“Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.”* When Jesus was crucified outside the city wall of Jerusalem, he not only fulfilled the types and shadows of the Day of Atonement, but he was rejected by his people as evidenced by the fact that “the camp” (Jerusalem) heaped reproach upon him. The author’s point is that Jesus’ rejection, suffering, and sacrifice secured our salvation. Therefore, those reading this letter need to go to the Jesus “outside” the camp, that is, to the heavenly city and the heavenly Zion where he always may be found. This was an important point to all those considering returning to Judaism. To go back to Jerusalem (Judaism) is to return to a guilty conscience, perpetual sacrifices which do nothing, and to a priesthood which has been superceded. We are to go to Jesus where he may be found, and that we must not be ashamed to identify with a crucified Savior whom the world hates, but who alone made that sacrifice which reconciles us to God.

For the Christian, there is no earthly city (or nation) where God dwells as when he dwelt in the midst of his people in the tabernacle or temple. Wherever we are, we are pilgrims on this earth on our way to the heavenly city. As the author puts it in verse 14, *“for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”* We look to Jesus not only as the founder and author of faith, but as our great high priest in the heavenly temple in the heavenly city. This is but another way of reaffirming that all those in Christ possess a dual citizenship. We have both a national identity as Americans and a heavenly citizenship as Christians. Therefore, we endure the shame of Christ in the midst of the civil kingdom, all the while anticipating the glories of the heavenly kingdom which Jesus has accomplished for us.

This leads to the following exhortation found in verse 15-16: *“through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”* Since the sacrifice for sin has already been made, the sacrifices which are pleasing to God are the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving associated with Christian worship—what we do together on the Lord’s day during church—and in a life of gratitude lived unto God, who has given us everything in Christ, and whose commandments we now strive to obey. Therefore, we do good—as spelled out in the imperatives we have just considered. We share what we have with those in need. And our entire life should be seen as a sacrifice of thanksgiving unto the God who has saved us from our sins. We do so knowing that because of the sacrifice of Christ—which renders us “perfect” before God—God is now pleased with those sacrifices of gratitude which we offer before him through our worship, and our striving to obey his commands.

What, then, do we take with from this passage by way of application?

What, then, do we take with from this passage by way of application? Because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ outside the camp, we are rendered “perfect.” Jesus is the same, yesterday and today and forever, because he is God in human flesh, whose priesthood opens the way for us to enter into the presence of the Lord and offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving (worship) which we know will please him. We can love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can show hospitality to strangers, we remember those in prison, we honor the marriage bed, and we strive to avoid the love of money—knowing that these things are our response to the one sacrifice of Christ, who is my helper and in whom I will not fear. In Jesus’s shame, suffering, and rejection, we are sanctified. Therefore let us continually offer sacrifices of praise to God.