

Hebrews 13B (2014)

- We return to the final chapter of Hebrews
 - As you remember, the writer's final chapter consists of a list of exhortations
 - These are requests calling for the church to live-out their faith boldly, obediently
 - Each point the writer makes in Chapter 13 is rooted in the writer's call to offer God an acceptable sacrifice of service
 - He's calling the church to live in gratitude for what the Lord accomplished on the cross
 - And we show God our gratitude by living according to His commands
 - Last week, we studied the first three exhortations, all dealing with the witness of the church
 - First, the writer said, remain open to receiving strangers by showing hospitality, even though persecution was a risk
 - Secondly, honor the marriage bed according to God's Word, especially in a culture where sexual impurity is common and accepted
 - Finally, live free from the love of money by being content in a world that only seeks for more and more
 - Imagine the power of a group of believers where these things were routinely practiced?
 - How different would the Church look from the world?
 - From a selfish world lacking hospitality, marital faithfulness, and contentment?
 - How compelling might a loving, faithful, content group of people appear to such a world?
 - Then you can understand why the writer is emphasizing that believers make these behaviors a priority

- And now, we move forward in the chapter to consider an obligation which lies at the heart of our witness and message

Heb. 13:7 Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

Heb. 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Heb. 13:9 Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited.

- The writer asks the church to remember those who led you
 - The Greek word for “remember” means literally “observe carefully”
 - The writer is asking us to look at the examples set by certain men
 - And then to imitate their faith, that is, the way they lived-out their faith
 - We can see that the writer is speaking about a specific group of leaders: apostles
 - First, he says these led the Church in the past
 - In the very beginning, the Church was led only by the twelve apostles
 - In time, those men would lay hands on other leaders, who joined them in ruling over the Church
 - But in the beginning, it was just the apostles
 - Secondly, the writer says these men “spoke” the Word of God to the Church
 - Only apostles were gifted to bring forth the Word of God
 - As we’ve discussed before, the apostles were the prophets of the New Testament
 - And they spoke (and wrote) the Word of God to the early Church
 - The writer doesn’t say these men “wrote” the Word of God, but rather, they “spoke” because many of the New Testament letters were yet to be written
 - The truth was still circulated largely by word of mouth

- Finally, the writer says, consider the result of their conduct
 - The result of the apostles' conduct was the rapid and strong growth of the Church
 - As the book of Acts records, their faithful, sacrificial life of faith produced much fruit in the early Church
 - The apostles' ministry was responsible for a multitude of converts from among Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles throughout the known world
 - There can be no better pattern to follow than the one set for us by these men
 - Obviously, we never saw the conduct of the apostles, nor did we hear them speak, but we do have the writings they left behind in the New Testament
 - So for the Church today, the command becomes to observe carefully the New Testament scriptures
 - Consider how the apostles lived and served the Church in the book of Acts
 - Give careful consideration to the teaching they left us in their letters
 - And imitate their sacrifices
- In the centuries since these men lived and ruled the Church, it's become popular to claim the apostles operated from culturally-biased perspective
 - Bible critics assert that these men were products of first century Palestine
 - Patriarchal
 - Misogynistic
 - Overbearing
 - Authoritative
 - And so, they say, as we consult their teaching in the New Testament, we must filter what we read, interpreting it in a culturally relevant way

- Critics will tell you that Paul's instructions regarding the roles of men and women are culturally dependent and no longer relevant
- The apostles' instructions on sexuality or Church leadership or family life or money, or even Heaven and Hell, are antiquated
- Therefore, we are free to reinterpret these issues based on modern values
- So though Hebrews says consider carefully the men who led and taught the early Church, the biblical re-constructionists say, take their example with a grain of salt
- I believe the Lord knew His Word, delivered through the apostles, would come under assault in this way
 - So He inspired the writer to testify that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever in v.8
 - The Word of God, spoken through the apostles, had its origins in Christ Jesus
 - While the apostles were human beings with certain biases and a certain cultural perspective, when they spoke the Word of God, they weren't speaking according to their own wisdom
 - They were speaking under inspiration of the Spirit, delivering a timeless message authored by God Himself
 - God's Word never changes, because truth never needs to change
 - Jesus is always culturally relevant
 - And yet, He's never subject to the whims of culture
 - God delivered to the apostles a set of instructions that were prepared before the foundations of the earth
 - And those instructions will outlast these heavens and earth
 - Ironically, long after all earthly culture is gone, these Words will remain in effect
- Which is why the writer says in v.9, that we are not to be carried away by other teaching

- “Varied and strange teaching” refers to the assortment of confusing and false teaching the enemy offers to lead people away from the truth
 - The enemy’s program is not to promote a certain false teaching, but to oppose a certain truthful teaching
 - The enemy doesn’t care which false teaching a person chases after
 - He really is completely ecumenical when it comes to what false teaching you would prefer
 - Just so long as they don’t follow after the truth found in God’s Word
 - So Satan is always at work to create new, varied and strange teaching to draw people’s interest away from the scriptures
- But we believers can’t allow ourselves to be caught up in these things
 - Instead, we must be strengthened in our heart by God’s grace
 - To be strengthened by grace means to be reinforced in our Christian liberty, resting in Christ’s work alone
 - Not becoming slaves to works of one kind or another
 - If you understand that you rest in a work done by Christ, not depending on your own works to be acceptable to God
 - Then you will be empowered to serve God in tremendous ways
 - But as long as you think you have to do something to please God, that your relationship is dependent on works
 - You’ll be hampered by that notion, focusing on those things you think you must do to keep God happy, rather than being free to follow wherever He sends you
 - As Paul says in Colossians

Col. 2:20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, **Col. 2:21** “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” **Col. 2:22** (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

Col. 2:23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

- Paul says by Christ's death, we have been set free from the principles of the world, which refers to works of flesh that try to earn God's pleasure
 - Having become partakers of God's grace, we need not concern ourselves with rules that demand we keep laws or rules intended to keep us clean
 - Paul mentions examples of do not handle, taste and touch, which are references to the laws of Israel, intended to keep a man ritually clean
 - These things have the appearance of wisdom, but they merely deal with treatment of the body
 - But once your soul has been made clean by the grace of God in Christ, these rules are without purpose in our lives
- Notice at the end of v.9, the writer mentions food also, adding that foods aren't the source of a Christians' strengthening spiritually
 - The Jewish believers in the Church of the writer's day were being tempted by false teachers to resubmit to the dietary restrictions of the Levitical system
 - They were being told to only eat certain foods and to abstain from non-kosher foods
 - These varied and strange teachings claimed that by abstaining from certain foods, these believers were making themselves more pleasing to God
 - They were becoming more holy, more spiritually clean
 - But this writer says, that these teachings were not capable of producing the spiritual benefit their proponents claimed
 - Only resting in God's grace holds any potential to grow us spiritually
 - And since Jesus never changes, we need not depart from His Word in seeking for additional advantages or secret solutions to godliness

- Some today are making the same mistakes again, returning to practicing selective parts of the Levitical laws, in the misguided expectation that these behaviors please God or increase holiness
 - Today, some believers have been convinced by various Jewish or “messianic” movements within the Church to submit to the dietary restrictions of the Mosaic Law
 - Some practice these things merely for personal health reasons or simply as a means of honoring Christ
 - In these cases, the Christian has liberty to live this way
 - Nevertheless, they must be careful to ensure their witness doesn’t confuse other Christians about why they do what they do
 - On the other hand, if they practice such things thinking they are obligated to do it, or believing they are making themselves more holy or pleasing to the Lord, then the practice is wrong
 - It is a testimony to their spiritual immaturity and ignorance of Scripture
 - And this testimony is both false and potentially harmful within the Church
 - It has the potential to lead others to doubt in the sufficiency of God’s grace
 - Ironically, those who claim the dietary restrictions of the Law are appropriate for Christians, often cite Hebrews 13:8 in support
 - They say that Jesus never changes His instructions to the believer
 - So if following the Law was necessary for Israel in the past, then it must still be appropriate for the believer today
 - Because, as they say, the Lord never changes
- But those who say such things are misinterpreting Heb. 13:8, misunderstanding the purpose of the Law and conveniently ignoring much of the New Testament
 - Heb. 13:8 isn’t saying that Jesus’ *instructions* never change
 - It says Jesus *Himself* never changes

- But we see God's program changing across the pages of the Bible
 - For example, in the Garden, Man ate only plants
 - Then, after the flood, men were told to eat anything
 - Later, Israel was told to restrict it's diet in various ways
 - And now, the Church is permitted to eat anything
 - Each of these changes was part of God's eternal, unchanging purpose
 - We only come to understand this truth by consulting the entire counsel of God's Word
 - As a New Covenant believer, we are under grace, free from preoccupation with foods and such
 - Don't let physical, passing things become substitutes for resting in God's grace, found by giving careful attention to His Word
- Unfortunately, the strange teachings of that day went well beyond merely enticing Christians to limit their diets

Heb. 13:10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat.

Heb. 13:11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp.

Heb. 13:12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate.

Heb. 13:13 So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

Heb. 13:14 For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.

Heb. 13:15 Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.

Heb. 13:16 And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

- While the writer doesn't come out and name the false teaching he is working against, we can tell what's bothering him
 - In a word, it's about sacrifice
 - The essential act of service to God has always been sacrifice

- Sacrifice is the necessary payment for sin
- Sacrifice appeases the wrath of God
- Sacrifice restores fellowship
- From Abel to Noah to Abraham to Moses and all Israel, and even to the Church today, sacrifice is at the heart of worship
- Under the New Covenant, our sacrifice is found in the body and blood of Christ, sacrificed in our place
 - And then Paul teaches in Romans 12 that we, in turn, should make our lives a living sacrifice to God, in thanks for His mercy
 - He died for us, so we live our life for Him
 - We sacrifice our desires to suit His desires
 - We sacrifice our priorities to accomplish His priorities
 - That's the proper New Covenant sacrifice, upon which our fellowship with God is made possible
- But Judaizers in the Church were teaching Jewish believers that they were still required to perform animal sacrifices on the altar at the Jewish temple
 - Like the dietary laws, this was one of those strange teachings that draw believers away from grace and back into bondage to Law
 - This teaching was even worse, because it had the potential to erode a believer's confidence in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice
 - Because if it were true that animal sacrifice were required to remain in God's favor, what would that say about the meaning and power of Christ's death?
 - The writer's concerned that the people were being taught they still had to add to what Christ did – which negates what Christ did!
- The writer counters that temple sacrifices are useless, and he proves his point by highlighting the role of the priests

- In the temple, the priest officiated for you in that sacrifice of the animal you delivered – *you worked with the priest* to get that done
 - The role of every priest, as we learned earlier in this letter, is to represent God before men and men before God
 - But the writer points out that the priests officiating in the temple sacrifices couldn't qualify to eat from the Christian's altar
 - Eating at the Christian's altar is a reference to participating in the Christian communion meal, which pictures our Lord crucified as our sacrifice
 - The Jewish priests in the temple were not believers, since they had not accepted Christ as Messiah
 - So they were not qualified to participate in the Christian communion meal
- And yet, Christians felt it necessary to turn to these men as intercessors who could advance their relationship with the Lord?
 - So how sadly ironic, that a Christian might seek the services of a priest who himself did not know our Lord and Intercessor!
 - Certainly, no Christian should seek the services of such a meaningless ritual
- In vs.11-12, the writer reminds his readers that the animals sacrificed in the Levitical system were never more than pictures of the one, true sacrifice God makes available in His Son
 - The bodies of the bloodied animals were taken out of the temple and burned outside the camp of Israel, as required by the Law
 - Even in this detail, the writer points out that the Law pictured Christ
- For in the same way, our Lord's body was crucified outside the city walls, in fulfillment of this picture
 - And that sacrifice resulted in the sanctification of Christ's people, all those who trust in His sacrifice
 - The writer is reminding his readers that the Lord's sacrifice was entirely sufficient to atone for sin and sanctify us

- Those earlier animal sacrifices merely pointed to a future atonement with the power to address all sin for all time
- Because this church was willing to succumb to strange and false teaching about the Law and sacrifices, they were in danger of undermining their witness
 - Think about what they told the world every time they went back to the temple and cut up another animal
 - Instead of remembering the teaching of the apostles and holding to that teaching, they were drifting away, setting aside their witness
 - They were telling the world that Christ is not sufficient, that you need something more
 - When in fact, what you need is what you already have!
 - And by their willingness to chase after such things, they set aside their sacrificial service to God
 - They were living a lie, instead of living in the truth
 - This is an ever-present danger for the Church
 - The specific kind of strange teaching may change
 - Back then, it was participation under the Law
 - Perhaps today, it will be some strange teaching about spiritual gifts, prosperity, healing, or the like
 - Whatever captivates the Church and distracts us from Christ, leaves the same potential for danger and disruption
 - Instead of preaching Christ and Him crucified, we begin witnessing to something false, temporary and meaningless
- Usually, this transition from the true Gospel to something less, is a result of misplaced affections or a desire to fit into the culture
 - In the writer's day, the motivation was avoiding persecution
 - Notice in v.13, the writer calls upon his audience to be willing to suffer reproach with Christ
 - That was the issue driving their willingness to return to the temple service

- If they returned, they would placate the Jewish community living around them
- And every time a Christian did that, the Jewish world saw it as a victory against Christianity
 - They saw it as showing the Faith to be weak and hollow
 - As a result, the witness of those individuals was lost
- From the point of view of the Jewish community, though these Christians persisted in following their discredited rabbi, Jesus, at least they kept the required temple services
- But the writer calls the Church not to be afraid of suffering persecution for Christ
 - Christ suffered for us
 - So we may be called upon to suffer for His Name's sake
 - And if we try too hard to avoid persecution, we may be tempted to engage in some very unbiblical and unhealthy practices
 - Just as these believers were tempted to return to the temple service
- Interestingly, the writer says in v.14, that the Jewish believers did not have a lasting city, referring to the city of Jerusalem of that day
 - As I covered in my first lesson, this letter was probably written in the years right before the temple and city were destroyed by the Romans
 - The writer seems to have known that the destruction of the city was coming soon
 - He says it's not going to last
 - In other words, it was futile for believers to continue showing an interest in things that were destined to pass away
 - Things including the earthly temple and even the city of Jerusalem
 - Symbols of unbelieving Israel
 - Instead, the writer says the believer must maintain a focus on the eternal city, the Heavenly Jerusalem, which is our future home

- As I like to say, living with eyes for eternity, which means considering all our actions from an eternal point of view
- When you live this way, you will come to different conclusions about so many things in life
- If you're living with eyes for eternity and are faced with a choice between suffering persecution or forsaking our witness, you'll make the right choice
- With the right perspective, you'll understand what kind of sacrifice God desires, as the writer says in v.15
 - He says if you desire to make sacrifice to God, then let's do it in the way God receives it
 - Continually, we are to offer up sacrifice of praise
 - He explains that means the fruit of our lips
 - Testifying with our mouths to the truth of the Gospel
 - Naming Christ as Lord, in other words
 - Testifying publicly about God's grace and giving thanks for His mercy
 - That's the acceptable form of praise we are to offer God
 - How is this a sacrifice?
 - Because sometimes that testimony will result in persecution, hatred and rejection
 - That's the sacrifice Christ receives
- Moreover, the writer says don't neglect to do good and share with others in what you have, and these things are sufficient sacrifice
 - We don't need to return to old means of sacrifice
 - We don't need to return to the Law
 - We don't need ritual
 - Nor do we need to invent our own rituals
 - We don't need new forms of legalism

- Let's set aside various forms of strange and false teaching
- All we need is to live sacrificially for the Christ Who saves us
 - Knowing and following His Word
 - Follow the example of the apostles
 - Make our lives a living sacrifice
 - Live with eyes for eternity