

Go to Jesus

The first twelve chapters of Hebrews focuses on theology, the necessary doctrines on which believers base their daily living. Chapter 13, referencing Old Testament practices,



Michael K. Olmsted

may seem like a jumble of ideas. Though we do not know the exact ideas that were threatening the church of that day, the writer presents encouragement for sound living as Christ followers and for a faith that shapes that living.

A common human weakness is to presume we are now established and knowledgeable in our faith, so we relax in contentment and drift away from an exemplary life before the world. The writer draws us back to who we should be as God's children. His first statement is the foundation for everything else he teaches: "Let mutual love continue" (13:1). Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 5:44). The Apostle John wrote: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). You already know this "love" is no easy sentimental emotion, but is instead based on Jesus' example and results in action.

Hebrews 13:1-6 gives some specific examples of how we are to live. As family we are to provide hospitality for one another, whether we are neighbors or travelers. There were no Hampton Inns in the first century and it could be dangerous for Christians to travel in a hostile society, so a safe haven in a community of faith was necessary. Remember that the Apostle Paul often faced threats and found shelter with Christians as he traveled the empire. As a college student I commuted to my first church in rural Oklahoma. One way they practiced hospitality was to take turns hosting me every Sunday for lunch and an afternoon nap before I made visits and counseled people.

As God's people we are to "remember those in prison ... those who are tortured" (v. 3), not just in a sentimental way, but as if we are in their position! Marriage is to be treated as sacred, followed by the warning "God will judge fornicators and adulterers" (v. 4). Do not be consumed by a love for money. Instead be content with what you have (v. 5). This is no

prohibition of a desire to improve your circumstances or working hard to achieve a dream. It is a simple warning that when wealth and power are the goals of your life the result is a self-consuming pride and emptiness of soul.

The opposite to a life of selfish gain is to know "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" (v. 6). The writer reminds his readers to "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith" (v. 7). The Bible we read was not written by some philosopher, locked away in his meditative world; these ideas come from the loving God who continually spoke to real people in the challenges of life, showing them his love and grace even when they were self-absorbed.

Who we are and how we live as God's people is the result of faith in God. Now the writer lays the foundation for a life of Christian example just described. Behind our spiritual foundation is not just an idea but the absolute truth: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (v. 8). This core of the Christian faith dramatically contrasts with what the writer calls "strange teachings" (v. 9).

We do not know exactly what false teachings were threatening this family of faith. "Strange" may refer to the ancient Levitical system of sacrifices as outdated or no longer necessary. As in other New Testament writings, the threat may have been a return to dietary restrictions, rules about eating with Gentiles, or circumcision as a requirement for true faith. Because of specific language, we do know there was discussion about sacrifice and sin. In verses 9-13 the writer references animals sacrificed for the sins of Israel on the Day of Atonement every year. Chapter 9 presents Christ's death on the cross as completely fulfilling the requirement of the Law. God's grace is now available to all who believe, both Jew and Gentile. A regimented priesthood, rituals, sacrifices and Temple cannot compare to Jesus' death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul describes our spiritual life as "a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all" (Colossians 3:11).

The declaration is made that because of what Jesus has done for us, we should "go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured...for here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city

Formations

February 25, 2018

Scripture: Hebrews 11:24-26, 32; 12:2

that is to come" (vv. 13-14). In Christ we are set free from the burdens of legalism and rituals to experience a personal relationship with God. Instead of the sacrifices of lambs and bullocks, "let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (v. 15). The daily sacrifices Christians offer to God are described: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." Sacrifice is not giving some thing, but giving your whole self to God and to those around us.

Hospitality is much more than inviting someone to your home after church. It includes a variety of ways to extend friendship and sharing time with others. While we are not isolated from society or from the support of a church family, there is much heartache and loneliness in our world. We reach out to the world with significant missionary endeavors and humanitarian projects. But let's not forget the family down the street whose dad lost his job, those new neighbors who moved on the block from another state, or the widow without family nearby. Hospitality can help people see Jesus.

The writer says, "be content with what you have" (v. 5). Of all people, we Americans love power, success, and money, but the only true source of contentment is in knowing that God "will never leave you or forsake you" because "the Lord is your helper... no need to be afraid...what can anyone do to you?" (v. 6). The current mindset of America seems to be that morality and values are unimportant, but wealth and power are the greatest treasure. Is this the character of a "Christian" nation? Do your values match your professed faith?

There was a time when European nations looked at the rest of the world as heathen and in real need of "our" salvation. Now the gospel of Jesus Christ seems to be growing more outside the European/American nations. Considering our own country, will we who call ourselves the church begin to model the character of Jesus? Will we model compassion, reach out to the oppressed, and live with integrity? There is no greater method for sharing the love of God than by living out his grace every day.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.