

October 27, 2019

WHAT DOES A LIFE OF WORSHIP LOOK LIKE?

Hebrews 13:1-6

(28 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)

Marcus Aurelius reigned as emperor in the Roman Empire for about twenty years in the second century. And his reign saw seasons of intense persecution in the church. Justin Martyr was killed in this time, and persecution was widespread and severe in areas like Gaul. In large measure the reason seems to be that this period saw a number of natural disasters. In the two-decade reign of Marcus Aurelius alone there was severe flooding, a major earthquake, and pestilence. And each time these kinds of things happened, the immediate reaction was to blame it on the Christians, which in turn led to their persecution.

So, during such times, how is the church thinking? What are they doing? Well, we get a glimpse from the pen of Theophilus of Antioch. He was the bishop of Antioch in Syria during this time, and the only surviving writing we have from him is a letter he wrote defending Christianity. And what he wrote was simply a description of who Christians are and how they live. Here's what he wrote: "Christians exhibit temperance, exercise self-control, preserve monogamy, guard chastity, cast out unrighteousness, root out sin, care for righteousness, live [according to] the law, practice godliness, confess God."¹ In other words, what he's saying is that in the midst of all the persecution and threat to them, believers simply live in accordance with the Bible's teaching so that they honor their Lord and direct glory to him in the midst of the world.

It's a powerful statement, but it wasn't a novel idea. Years earlier the author of Hebrews had written the same thing to a group of Jewish Christians who, under persecution, had been tempted to grow weary in obedience and walk away from Christ. The author had written this letter to encourage them to press on, to warn them against walking away, and to instruct them in how to live. That last element is especially apparent in this thirteenth chapter that we begin this morning. Because what we find here are instructions to a persecuted and weary people to keep living holy lives.

The chapter itself, as you'll see, is a bit different than what we've seen in the prior chapters of this book. To this point the author has provided many lengthy and sustained arguments, sometimes climaxing in a theological truth and other times an exhortation. But in this final chapter, you'll see a series of exhortations, multiplied at a greater rate than we've seen previously. For that reason, I referred to this section a few weeks back as something of an epilogue. It's clearly different in nature from the chapters that precedes it. At the same time, however, that doesn't mean that it is unconnected. Rather, I think this chapter fleshes out an exhortation that ends chapter 12. At the end of chapter 12 the author wrote, "Let us offer to

¹Theophilus, "To Autolytus, 3.15," *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. Everett Ferguson (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 210.

God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (12:28-29). And I argued that “worship” here is a reference to all of life. Under the old covenant, worship was performed in offering the sacrifice of a slain animal. Under the new covenant, acceptable worship is presenting our own bodies as a sacrifice, but it is a *living* sacrifice, living all of life unto the Lord, obeying him, honoring him, and bringing glory to his name.

But this raises a question, doesn’t it? And that question is: “What does a life of worship before God look like?” I believe that chapter 13 provides an answer to that question, showing us with a series of exhortations. Therefore, this morning I want to lay out for us some elements of a life of worship, giving them to us in a series of brief exhortations. So, what do Christians do who are rightly giving their lives as a living sacrifice unto the Lord?

Love other Christians

This is not to say that we don’t love non-Christians as well, but the emphasis of verse 1 is that we love fellow believers. The author writes, “Let brotherly love continue.” The reason the author says “brotherly” love is because love between Christians is love between family members. We may not have the same earthly fathers or mothers, but we do have the same *heavenly* Father. And so the Bible pictures believers as a family.

Consequently, we called to love one another as brothers and sisters of Christ. We’re calling to continue in *brotherly* love. And because we may be tempted to gloss over this with a feeling of, “Yeah, we all know that,” consider what the Bible says about loving one another. Love is the first fruit of the Spirit mentioned. Love is at the top of lists concerning holiness (including this one!). Jesus told us that our love for one another would be the sign to the world that we know Jesus. We’re told in 1 Corinthians 13 that even if we give our body to be burned or do other such sacrificial acts, it is meaningless if we don’t have love. And we’re told that when we love one another in specific ways—like visiting, feeding, and caring for one another—Jesus considers it as if we’re loving him in those ways. And I could say more, but we get the picture, I hope. It is no overstatement to say that all of our responsibilities before the Lord revolve around love.

So, in the midst of struggles and enduring hostility in the culture, one of the things that we can perhaps feel is the temptation to pull away from is loving one another. The tendency can be to pull inward to ourselves, focus simply on our struggles, and neglect others. But the Scripture tells us that we can’t consider that an option. Rather, we must love one another and pray that the Spirit would equip us to love one another more. Let us then—both as we gather together on Sundays and in our lives Monday through Saturday—challenge ourselves to find ways to show love for our fellow believers. We can do this with our prayers, sending an encouraging note, text, or phone call, or a visit—which leads us to our next exhortation.

Show hospitality

The author of Hebrews writes, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (v. 2). This kind of verse is intriguing, and the

temptation is to jump to that part about entertaining angels, but let's touch on the beginning of the verse first—simply the need to show hospitality. Hospitality holds a more prominent place in the Bible than we might think. It's consistently listed as a mark of holy living (Rom 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9). It's a qualification for being an elder (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). When Paul speaks of caring for widows in 1 Timothy 5 and notes the qualifications the widows should meet, he mentions that they need to have shown hospitality. Hospitality is a big deal. And it makes sense if you understand things about the culture at the time.

You see, in the times when Scripture was being written, traveling was risky. Inns were often nasty and dangerous. Believers found themselves at times the enemies of society, which only increased the danger of travel for them. And so if believers traveled, they were quite dependent on other believers to care for them, provide them lodging, etc. That is, they were dependent on fellow believers showing them hospitality. This was true even during OT times. We remember when Abraham took in three men of God who turned out to be angels and the Lord himself. I think that's the reference about angels. Abraham showed hospitality and turned out to host angels (and the Lord himself!). So, the author notes that we might do likewise if we simply show hospitality. Who knows whom God might send our way! But when you understand the nature and need for hospitality in the kind of setting I've described, it makes sense that the Scriptures stress the need to show hospitality, even to fellow believers who are strangers to you.

But we could respond that the need isn't as great in our setting. And I think that would be fair in one sense. Hotels are somewhat easier to come by now than they were in the first century Roman world. With our connectedness, it is easier to touch base with someone who lives in an area and arrange something with them. In other words, I probably wouldn't just land in Louisville, KY one night as a stranger and think, "I hope some believer who doesn't know me will take me in." Rather, I can place a phone call, send an email, or the like, let them know when I'll be there, and set all of this up ahead of time. Things have certainly changed.

However, I don't think the general need for hospitality has disappeared. The need for housing strangers who love Jesus may have lessened, but with the increase in connectivity, I think the feeling of loneliness has actually increased. People can deceive themselves into thinking they have friends because of social media, but when they get away from all their devices, they feel alone—and lonely. And so I think the call to bring believers into our lives and into our homes is actually quite needed today.

So, let me apply this practically as a church. I think you and I need to feel this command and strive to open our homes to one another on a regular basis. I think that's a worthy goal. Now, I'm not suggesting particular laws on how often and how many because the Scripture doesn't. But with the Scripture's emphasis on hospitality, it would be irresponsible to preach this exhortation without suggesting that all of us see if this might be an area where we can grow.

And I know instantly there can be some push back in our hearts. Maybe already these have started forming in our own hearts. And I think that this is because hospitality isn't always easy. In fact, 1 Peter 4:9 says, "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." You don't hear

anyone say, “Eat that delicious ice cream without grumbling.” Why? Because eating ice cream is easy and inviting. Showing hospitality can feel inconvenient, imposing discomfort and difficulty into our lives. And yet the Bible keeps noting our need to be hospitable.

So, let’s try to tackle the challenges briefly. For example, we might convince ourselves that others might not want to be in our homes. Maybe, we think, our homes aren’t that nice anyway. You know what, the lonely person who may be sitting on the same row as you doesn’t care how nice your house is. But, we might think that it’s inconvenient. I think it can be, but that’s okay. Obedience to Jesus sometimes is. He uses the imagery of taking up our cross and following him, after all. And wouldn’t we rather our lonely brother or sister know he or she isn’t alone than to craft a convenient life for ourselves? But what about making sure our house is cleaned up? Again, if we wait until everything is perfect in our lives before we start obeying Christ, we’ll wait forever. Invite someone to come over and fold laundry with you, cook dinner with you, rake up the leaves with you. There are students here, for example, who would love that, and this isn’t my way of manipulating some to come help with my leaves, I promise.

But we might also note that hospitality costs us. That is, you might say that it’s expensive. And I’ll freely acknowledge that it can be. It doesn’t have to be all the time, but cooking meals for others can change the grocery bill. Lili and I have regular conversations about our grocery bill and hospitality. But one of the more challenging things I read this last year was from Rosaria Butterfield in her excellent book *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. She writes, “Kent [her husband] and I budget for it, and it hurts. Practicing daily, ordinary, Christian hospitality doubles our grocery budget—and sometimes triples it. There are vacations we do not take, house projects that never get started, entertainment habits that never get an open door, new cars and gadgets that we don’t even bother coveting. . . . It costs money and time and heartache to run a house that values radically ordinary hospitality and nightly table fellowship, and we are all in.”²

Now, this is an area where that family excels, and again, there is no law on how often we do this and how many we invite in, but just moving in that direction I believe would be a valuable goal for all of us. Targeting that visitor this morning and initiating a meal or coffee with them, having them into your home, and beginning to let them into your life is a glorious way to reflect the hospitality of God toward us. And the reality is that as much as the need to travel into areas where you don’t know anyone has largely dissipated with all the connectivity we now have, the reality is that as much as we’ve increased in connectedness, loneliness has only intensified. Do not neglect to show hospitality.

Remember fellow believers who are suffering

In verse 3 we read, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” In a culture and time when believers

²Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 63.

are facing persecution, there can be a temptation to want to distance ourselves from those who are being attacked. It's a form of self-protection. So, if your Christian brother is imprisoned for preaching the gospel, there might arise a temptation to act like you don't know him or don't want to be identified with him. We see this with Peter when Jesus was on trial, don't we? You basically see him tripping over himself to avoid being identified as one of Jesus' disciples once Jesus gets in the crosshairs of the Jewish and Roman officials.

So, the author of Hebrews reminds his readers that they need to do the opposite of Peter in that instance. They need to remember their fellow believers who are suffering for the faith. Live as if you're in prison with them. Care for them as they're being mistreated, remembering that they're part of the body of Christ. Using that body imagery, just as it would be ridiculous to ignore part of your body which is suffering, thinking, "Well, it's just my left arm, and that's not all that important," so it is crazy to distance ourselves from fellow member of the body of Christ when they're suffering.

These Jewish believers, according to chapter 10, had at one time done a good job of this, but with the continuing nature of temptation and the desire to avoid it, perhaps the appeal to stay as far away from those suffering grow stronger. And the author is telling them not to let it win the day. Show the fellowship of the saints, he's telling them.

And so it is with us. I don't know how many of us know fellow Christians who are in prison for their faith. But my guess is that with the increase of the unacceptability of Christian belief and practice in our culture, we're going to see more and more Christians mistreated. And when that day comes, there'll be a temptation to want to get into whatever place makes us more acceptable to the culture and less associated with outsiders. Don't give into it in that moment. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you are also in the body.

Next, he tell us to walk in sexual purity.

Walk in sexual purity

The way the author writes this in verse 4 is: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." Now, it is true that the author begins by focusing on those who are married, but he ends by warning against sexual immorality generally, reminding us that God will judge the sexually immoral. So, let's remember the call to believers in the Bible, once again, to walk in sexual purity.

This means, minimally, that we need to reserve all sexual activity for marriage alone, between a man and his wife. Any sexual activity outside of those parameters is forbidden. To the unmarried, this means that you need to make it your aim for the first person with whom you're sexually intimate in any way to be your spouse, if indeed you marry. And if you don't marry, then you need to avoid sexual intimacy in any form. And if you do so, you will by no means miss out on what it means to live a fulfilled life—or whatever message the culture would want to sell

you on this—after all, Jesus lived a perfectly fulfilled life, was the perfect human, and never married and so never experienced sexual intimacy, obviously.

To speak specifically of honoring the marriage bed, obviously rules against adultery, but it's also a reminder to avoid pornography or viewing any form of sexual immorality on any device. This may be the area where believers are most tempted to let their guard down in our culture, but don't. Remember Theophilus's words under the reign of Marcus Arelus—believers are to stand out as salt and light.

But of course, I'll also note that if we have failed in this area of sexual purity, then the call is to repent and walk in the forgiveness that you have in Christ. If you've been sexually active, you can stop now, and it doesn't mean that you're somehow doomed to live as a second-class citizen. Before her conversion Rahab was a prostitute, and the Lord's forgiveness was so thorough and glorious that she is part of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. So, let us today walk in sexual purity, repent of sexual immorality, enjoy the Lord's forgiveness and cleansing, and live a life of worship to the Lord.

And finally, keep your life free from the love of money and be content.

Keep your life free from the love of money and be content

Doesn't this list make you think, "The more things change, the more things stay the same"? The author writes, 'Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have' (v. 5). The temptation to love money isn't a temptation that is new or unique in twenty-first century western civilization. It was a temptation in first century Rome and every place and every century in between. When Jesus set allegiance to God against our temptation to worship and follow something else, he said, "You cannot serve God and money" (Matt 6:24).

Brothers and sisters, money can have a strong and powerful pull in our lives. There can be the temptation to hold on to much as you can, spend as much as you can, and along the way, always want and long for more. But as believers, we recognize that we're merely stewards of any money we have. And the Scripture tells us to store up treasure in heaven because our possessions here will one day fade away.

Two of the main ways that we can keep ourselves free from the love of money is to let it go regularly, making the deliberate decision to sow bountifully into the work of the Lord and his church, and another way is to be content with what we have, not allowing ourselves always to want more. That's what the author has said: "Be content with what you have."

But how? It's all nice and good to say, "Be content," and go out into the world all courageously, but how do you actually keep your heart content and free from coveting what others have? The author gives us an answer, writing, "For he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me'" (vv. 5-6).

In other words, when you have the Lord, you have the deepest longing of your heart. The unbeliever who has the world and lacks the Lord does not have the deepest thing he needs, but you do. Therefore, recognizing that we have the Lord and that we have all things in him—after all, we are heirs with the one for whom all things have been created—equips us to walk in contentment. And when we recognize we have the Lord, then there's no threat that can shake us ultimately. As Luther said, "Let goods and kingdoms go, this mortal life also, the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still, his kingdom is forever." He was acknowledging that if he had the Lord he could be content losing all else. And if that doesn't resonate in our hearts, then the main response for us today may be to go be with the Lord, seek his face, and pray with the apostles Paul that we would know God's love for us that surpasses understanding. If you're feeling discontent it may well be a symptom of forgetting the love of God that you have in Christ Jesus.

This morning we gather and praise our God because his Son lived, died for our sins, and walked out of the tomb alive on that Easter Sunday morning. But as we go out into a world that largely doesn't believe and a culture that looks much different than what our Lord has commanded, we must live differently. We must offer ourselves as living sacrifices to our Lord, which is worship. But what does it look like? In part, it means we love one another, show hospitality, remember one another as we're mistreated, walk in sexual purity, keep ourselves free from the love of money, and walk in contentment, realizing that we have the Lord himself. May we be a people who live this way and serve as salt and light in this dark and corrupt world so that they may glorify our Father in heaven. And may we show our response in faith to this call now as we come to the table. Amen.