

November 3, 2019

### SOME FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

Hebrews 13:7-19

*(29 of 30 in a series through Hebrews)*

Tomorrow will be my oldest son's seventeenth birthday. That doesn't seem real to me. I remember praying about the idea of having children in the sanctuary at the old building before he was born, rushing out of a preaching class in seminary on the day he came into the world, and a lot of joys found in playing with him while he was young. He got to where he was really interacting with me around March, just a few months after he was born, and so I would sit on the count sideways, with my legs pulled up, feet on the couch, and lay him against my propped-up legs a talk with him, while watching the NCAA basketball tournament that year. I have no memory of any basketball games that year, but I can remember how he'd laugh every time I'd get excited or hum to him the music that CBS would play every time their coverage started. It was a fun time that I can't believe is now nearly seventeen years ago.

It feels like every few minutes I have a realization that my kids are getting older and will someday soon no longer live under my roof. And each time I think about that, I'm driven to prayer. The reason, of course, is because I want more than anything for them to be men and a woman who know that they are loved by God and love him in return. There's nothing more important to me than that. And so, perhaps in an all-too-melodramatic way, I imagine sometimes different things I would say to them if I were only able to have one last conversation with them.

I mention that because when I look at the exhortations in Hebrews 13:7-19, this would be a fitting thing to say in a last conversation. These are the kinds of exhortations that you'd want to note. Now, of course, I'd want to say more, namely, how much I love them, etc. But this list of exhortations, if obeyed, would be a great summary of crucial matters for holy living. That's no doubt why it's the author's last instructions before going into the benediction and final aspects of this letter. Therefore, let's look at these final exhortations this morning that form for us a good summary of what are some of the crucial matters of Christian living. The first exhortation for us is seen in verses 7-8.

#### **Remember and imitate the faith of those who taught you the Scriptures**

The author writes in verse 7, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." Now, when he says this, the author is probably referring to individuals who have died because he makes reference the outcome of their way of life, which is probably a reference to them having followed Christ all the way to death. So, this is a call to remember those who first taught them the Scriptures and are now with the Lord.

In other words, this verse is a summary exhortation of what we saw back in chapter 11, where the author gave example after example of individuals who walked and persevered in faith. On

this occasion, instead of pointing them back to Moses, Rahab, and the like, he points them to people they knew, most likely in the early stages of their Christian life. And the reason the author is pointing them back to these individuals, calling his hearers to “remember” them is because it pulls them out of their instant circumstances that can loom large.

In other words, we may well find ourselves going through difficult times where we feel that we just can’t press on, but if we’ll just pull back and look outside of ourselves, to brothers and sisters who were faithful, we can find encouragement to press on. On this occasion, the author calls them to remember those who taught them the Word of God, who were faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, and are now with the Lord. They had their struggles. They had their challenges. But they pressed on and persevered in faith and faithful obedience.

Now, we might say, “my circumstances are different than theirs.” Their perseverance doesn’t compare to mine. But the author responds, “Perhaps, but Jesus Christ is the same.” That’s why he says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (v. 8). In other words, the Jesus that upheld them and strengthened them and gave them grace to endure is the same Jesus Christ who will do the same for them.

You don’t have to look back very far. Just think this morning about individuals who taught you the Word of God and finished well. You don’t have to imitate their lives, being just like them, but do imitate their faith, trusting Jesus until the end. That’s where the author begins, but he doesn’t stop there. Next, he focuses us on our need for and the sufficiency of Christ’s work.

### **Do not be diverted from your need for and the sufficiency of Christ’s work**

After encouraging them positively to remember their leaders and imitate their faith, the author exhorts them negatively, telling them what *not* to do. He writes, “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. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat” (vv. 9-10).

The particular temptation that these Jewish believers faced was abandoning Christ and going back to the practices of worship under the old covenant. They were simply tempted to live as if they’d never heard of Jesus. And by abandoning Jesus for old covenant practices, it might have felt acceptable. After all, they might tell themselves, they weren’t abandoning Jesus to pursue sexual immorality or the like. They were still being religious; they just weren’t following Jesus.

The problem, as the author of Hebrews points out, is that by turning away from Jesus to go back to the old covenant—with restrictions on what foods we can eat and the like—they are walking away from grace. Our God has given us rich grace that we so desperately need, but it only comes to us through Jesus Christ. They’re tempted to go back to the old covenant, but the priests who were practicing the sacrifices—perhaps even while this letter was being written—couldn’t taste of the grace that comes through Christ because they had refused to believe in

him. That's why he says that "we have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat" (v. 10).

Now, for us, this is absolutely something I would want to declare on my deathbed. Don't lose sight of your need for Jesus and his sufficiency for your salvation. I've noted many times throughout this book that I doubt our temptation is to turn away from Jesus and look to animal sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood, and the temple as our hope. But the temptation is always there to turn away from Jesus and look to something else. That something else could be good things—like good works. But nothing is enough. Only Jesus is enough. And only by faith alone in him are we justified. Let us not forget that.

If you lose sight of what you have in Christ, you will grow weary in following the Lord. The Christian faith will simply appear to you as a list of commands that you can't keep. But if you remember, day-in and day-out, that Christ is your only hope and you have him by faith—you can eat at that altar (meaning, I think, that you can benefit from his sacrifice for you)—then you can live a life of persevering, joyful obedience. So, don't be diverted from your need for Christ and the sufficiency of what he's done for you.

Now, by saying this, I'm not suggesting the Christian life is such that you can put it on cruise control. No, there is cost. The one who went to the cross for us commands us to follow him by using the same imagery. He tells us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. And that brings us to our next exhortation.

### **Deny yourself and focus on eternity**

As the author mentions the OT sacrificial system, he notes that there are some elements in this that point to Jesus that we do not think of, and one of them is that the sacrifices were burned outside the camp. Let's look at verse 11, and then I'll try to explain what he means. He writes, "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."

Now here's what he's referring to. In Leviticus 16 when the high priest brought the blood of the bull and the goat into the sanctuary, he didn't use their bodies as food. Rather, he was instructed to take their bodies outside of the camp and burn them. They were unclean.

So what? Well, the author notes that this paralleled what happened with Jesus. He writes in verse 12, "So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood." That is, when Jesus was sacrificed for our sin they actually crucified him outside of the city. Golgotha, where he was crucified, was outside of the city gate of Jerusalem.

And he sees significance in this. If the reason the sacrifices were burned outside the camp is because they were unclean at that point, then there is an idea of shame with being outside the camp. That's where unclean things went. In other words, this is an echo to the cross being an act of bearing shame, as Jesus' bears our sin and uncleanness for us. Remember when the

author wrote that Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame (12:2)? As he was crucified, outside the city, he was bearing the reproach of everyone that considered him guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death. Thus, the author concludes, “Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (vv. 13-14).

One reason these Jewish believers wanted to shrink back from following Jesus is because of the reproach they were bearing in society. They wanted to be welcomed in society, not be looked at as outcasts. But the author reminds them that the one they’re following—indeed the one who has saved them—is the one who bore shame and reproach in his death for us. And that same one is the one who calls us to follow him. Therefore, we need to understand that the Christian life is about denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Jesus who bore shame for us so that we might be made holy. The call to follow Christ isn’t less than that.

And it’s good that you and I come to grips with that now. If we think that following Jesus and teaching the things that he taught us to believe will invite the applause of society, then we’re setting ourselves up to be disappointed and crushed. Jesus taught us that if they hated him, they’ll hate us as well.

So why is it worth it to follow Jesus when it means that we’ll be “outside the camp” of those accepted in society? It’s worth it because this earth, as it is now, is not our home. We have an eternal home that will be ours with Christ forever. So, until that day when Christ returns, deny yourself, follow Christ, and focus on eternity.

But then he does offer a certain “sacrifice” we can make on this side of the death and resurrection of Christ. He tell us to praise God and do good to others.

### **Praise God and do good to others**

The author tells us in verses 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.” Notice that when he speaks of sacrifice on this side of the death and resurrection of Christ, it isn’t some sacrifice to atone for our sins. Jesus has already done everything we need to atone for sins. Rather, the “sacrifices” that we give are the sacrifices of praise to God and doing good and sharing with others.

In other words, we might say, those who have been forgiven of their sins have hearts that want to praise God and do good to others, sharing with them what we have. We are a people who are generous with praise to God and generous in sharing with one another.

Now, I do think the reason he uses the term “sacrifice” in talking about praising God is because he’s playing on the sacrificial system that these Jewish believers are tempted to turn back to, but it’s also true that offering praise to God can be a sacrifice, can’t it? After all, he deserves our praise when will feel crushed, are filled with despair, and are brought low, doesn’t he? This is

why it's a good practice to gather with the Lord's people Sunday after Sunday and sing praises to the Lord—who lived, died, and rose—so that we might be saved. He is worthy of our praise no matter what may come in our lives because, as we often sing, "Whatever my lot . . . it is well with my soul." So, that's one aspect of sacrifice that should characterize our lives as believers—praise to God—but there is another that is mentioned here. We are to do good to others, sharing with them what we have.

So, let's just ask ourselves, are our hearts generous with others, sharing what we have? If not, it may be that we've lost sight of what Christ has done for us. Do you remember the parable of the man who was forgiven more than he could pay in his lifetime, but then he went out and berated someone who owed him far less? We want to say to that man, "Have you forgotten what you were forgiven?" In the same way, when we aren't quick to open our hands and share with others, isn't it fitting to ask ourselves, "Have you forgotten what you've been given?" Wouldn't it be ludicrous for someone to be given a billion dollars and then struggle to share something that cost a hundred dollars with another? Well, brothers and sisters, we've been given much more than a billion dollars. We have Christ. We are heirs with him of all things. One day we'll begin an eternity of never needing anything at all but delighting in the glory that is ours in Christ. Surely we can reflect that reality by being quick to share of the things our Lord has given us to steward in this life. We give the sacrifice of praise and the sacrifice of doing good and sharing with others. And finally, we trust and submit to our leaders, while praying for them.

### **Trust and submit to your leaders, while praying for them**

The author has already directed his readers back to remembering those who first taught them the Word, and now he directs them to their current leaders. By "leaders" in this text, I think he means pastors. And the reason I say that is because he makes reference to these leaders "keeping watch over your souls," which is the task of an "overseer" in the Scripture, which is just another term for "pastor." The terms elder, pastor, and overseer are used interchangeably in Scripture. So, the call here is to trust and obey those whom the Lord has put in your life as overseers.

Now, this could get quite awkward, couldn't it? I'm a pastor, preaching a text that tells us to obey our leaders, whom I just identified as referring to pastors. But what's nice is that I'm simply one of five pastors at Cornerstone, so I don't speak of this text in relation to myself alone. The Lord has given you and me these men in our lives to oversee our souls. On the day of judgment this text says that we pastors will give an account for how we have instructed you in the Word and labored as best we can to ensure that you persevere in the faith. I've said before that this is the kind of text that keeps a pastor awake at night.

But because these men are laboring faithfully to oversee our souls and care for us, we should trust them and follow them. Now, yes, we do not follow pastors if they depart from the Word. But in as much as these men are striving to hold up the Word of God, then we should trust them and follow them as they labor to lead us. And I can vouch that these men labor faithfully in love

for you because they want to oversee your souls well. We have had long meetings, prayed, and wept because we're laboring to help ensure that those under our care endure in the faith.

And so, the idea is that we would be church members who are easy to oversee. When instructed in the Word, we aim to obey. When confronted with our sin, we repent. We try to be encouraging and eager to love. If, on the other hand, we decide that we simply want to be obstinate, push against God's Word, push against our leaders, and always be like a thorn in the side of the men who labor to oversee our souls, the Scripture says that we would cause them to do their job with groaning, and that would be no advantage to us. Rather, we want them to be able to joyfully oversee our souls. And we can do that by trusting and submitting to them.

Now, let me bring myself directly back into the mix with them, since I've spoken as if I'm not one of these men in the last few moments. We love you all, and count it a great treasure to be your pastors. I think that if pastors all across the nation knew what it was like to oversee the members of Cornerstone Community Church, they would ask to switch roles with us. You are eager to obey God's Word. You are encouraging to us. You obey Hebrews 13:17 well, and it pushes us as your pastors even more to make sure that we are careful to oversee you, love you, guide you, and instruct you well, in accord with the Scripture. And so this brings us to ask for your prayers.

It's interesting, the author of Hebrews moves right from his exhortation to obey and submit to leaders to a request for prayer. He says, "Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you sooner" (vv. 18-19). Now, he may mention this in an unrelated way to the command of verse 17, but it may also be that he writes this as one seeking to lead, shepherd, and care for this flock of believers who are feeling the pull to walk away from Christ.

So, I want to use this exhortation as an opportunity to ask you to pray for your pastors. As I noted, and can say with the author of this letter, we as your pastors do indeed desire to act honorably in all things, and as far as I can tell we are acting in that manner. Thus, we can say that we have a clear conscience. But this doesn't mean that we are somehow without need or cannot err. Our needs are great. Each week I find myself tempted to put out on communion, "Pray for your pastors to have wisdom this week." We never know what will come in a given week: a marriage in great struggle, someone's battle with depression, a need to correct and pull someone away from sin, a joyous report of victory in some area. But I can say in all of it as we seek to oversee this congregation as those who will give an account for your souls, pray for us. Some weeks I've found myself facing such despair that I couldn't sleep and felt as if a cloud were hanging over my head. Most weeks I can't believe we get to do this job. You are a joy. There is no other congregation whom I would rather oversee. I feel like somehow I'm cheating to be in this position, and I know my fellow pastors feel the same. So, follow us as we seek to follow our Lord, and pray for us that we would have wisdom to walk well.

What does it look like to follow the crucified and risen Lord? These verses are a pretty good summary of some crucial elements in that, aren't they? Remember and imitate the faith of those who have taught you the Scripture. Don't be diverted from your need for and the sufficiency of Christ's work. Deny yourself and focus on eternity. Praise God and do good to others. And, finally, trust and submit to your leaders, while praying for them. I think that would not only make up a good word if I had one last thing to say, but it's also the last instructions the Spirit wanted us to hear from this letter to the Hebrews before we dive into the glorious benediction next week. So let us this morning once again answer that we will indeed take up our cross and follow our Lord by grace through faith as we come to the table this morning. Amen.