

Hebrews 13, Part 1

M. W. Bassford, 9-18-11

As we come to the end of the book of Hebrews, we see the reason why the Hebrews writer laid out so much doctrine in so much detail. Once we understand the greatness of the sacrifice of Christ and its effect on our spiritual lives, that understanding ought to lead us to do something about it. Sometimes, this involves overarching philosophical decisions, like the decision of Jewish Christians to turn their backs on the traditions of their fathers. Sometimes, though, it involves making daily decisions to be righteous instead of wicked, to serve the Lord instead of serving someone else.

The final chapter of this book is devoted to a discussion of the second kind of action. In many ways, this section of Hebrews reminds us of the way that the apostle Paul commonly ends his epistles. In fact, the subject matter bears a great deal of resemblance to the subject matter of the end of 1 Thessalonians. From this, we could conclude either that Paul was the author of Hebrews after all, or that the writer of Hebrews was at least familiar with Paul's work.

Even beyond such historical considerations, this chapter is filled with spiritual insight that is still valuable to us today. Most 21st-century Christians are not tempted to return to Judaism, but many of us do struggle with temptations to selfishness and sexual immorality and materialism. As we listen to the Hebrews writer on these subjects, he calls us back to a more Christlike attitude and behavior. Let's learn from his words of wisdom as we look at Hebrews 13, Part 1.

Hospitality

In this section of practical reminders, the Hebrews writer first brings hospitality to our attention. We read about several manifestations of this general impulse in Hebrews 13:1-3. Our regard for others should first reveal itself in **OUR LOVE FOR OUR BRETHREN**. "Brotherly love" here doesn't have a Greek *agape* root. Instead, it has a *phileo* root. The word itself is *philadelphia*, like the city, which is why we call Philadelphia "the city of brotherly love", even though its inhabitants are not particularly known for being brotherly or loving. This passage isn't about self-sacrificing love for one another; instead, it's about having a warm, friendly regard for one another. We aren't commanded simply to love our brethren; we're commanded to like them, and by extension, to spend time with them and associate with them. We need to participate in activities like our men's prayer breakfast, so that we can carry out this command.

Second, we must be willing to practice **HOSPITALITY** itself. We must be willing to show love for strangers, particularly by inviting them into our homes. In many cases, there is a great deal of overlap between this command and the previous one. It's entirely possible for us to worship with someone, and yet have him be a complete stranger to us. This is particularly common in larger congregations, but it can still be a problem in a church the size of ours. When I talk to the members here, I'm often surprised by how little we know about one another. I'm afraid that many of the brethren here are content to associate with their families and the friends they've had for 20 years, without reaching out to many of our new members. We need to change that behavior, friends. We need to show kindness to the strangers in our midst.

Third, the writer instructs us to remember the **PRISONERS**. This refers to the prisoners the writer has mentioned in Hebrews 10, to the Christians who have been imprisoned because of their faith. If a brother wants to preach the gospel to ordinary felons, he can certainly do that, but it's not required by this verse. Instead, we find our clearest application for this passage when we consider those who are prisoners in their own bodies—our shut-ins. They certainly need people to care about them enough to come see them. Most weeks, I will spend an afternoon out visiting them, and it never ceases to amaze me how much those visits matter. I always come away feeling like that hour of my time was more valuable to them than to me! To put it another way, if you want an easy way to feel good about yourself, visit a shut-in.

Contentment

Next, the Hebrews writer considers some topics we can group under the general heading of contentment. We read about these in Hebrews 13:4-6. The first contentment problem that the writer brings up is the problem of **SEXUAL IMMORALITY**. Most sexually immoral people probably don't think about it in these terms, but what underlies fornication and adultery is discontent with the rules that God has imposed on us in our life situation. God commands unmarried people to be sexually abstinent, but the fornicator isn't satisfied with that and attempts to find fulfillment for his urges through sin. Likewise, God commands married people to be intimate only with their spouses, but the adulterer isn't satisfied with his one wife or her one husband, so they choose to seek satisfaction outside of the marital relationship. They think that their lives will be better because they have chosen to disobey God.

However, sexual immorality leads to regret both in this life and in the life to come. Like any other sin, sexual sin never delivers what it promises. It's never quite as good as the fornicator or the adulterer imagines that it's going to be. And so, instead of fulfillment, the result of this sin is emptiness, as the sinner returns again and again to sin, always hoping

to find the satisfaction that remains continually out of reach. Often, this search will lead to multiple sexual partners, and even long after those relationships end, their consequences remain. Immoral people must contend with sexually transmitted disease and unplanned pregnancies, to name a few of the more obvious problems. Furthermore, these consequences will often damage the legitimate relationships that God has given us. The effects of adultery in marriage are both obvious and devastating, when, as nearly always happens, our sin finds us out. Less obviously, fornication will take a similar toll. What woman wants to learn that the love of her life has a child in another state? What man wants to constantly be compared to his wife's previous sexual partners? Who wants to deal with the murky mess of sexual disaster? Godliness is simpler, cleaner, and better in every respect. Even if somehow we escape all of these problems, we will certainly not escape the judgment of God. Sexual sin leads to suffering here and to greater suffering in the hereafter.

Perhaps the only sin that is more popular than sexual sin is **THE LOVE OF MONEY**. It too starts with a contentment problem. Some man is unhappy, and he reaches the conclusion that he would be happy if only he had more money and better possessions. All of us, no matter how content we may be, have wondered what it would be like to live in one of those ritzy houses on the Gold Coast, or to take our daily commute in one of those \$100,000 luxury cars. It looks very alluring from the outside. However, pursuit of material possessions is no more likely to bring happiness than is the pursuit of forbidden sexual fruit. Even if we abandon our families, our moral codes, and our relationships with God in favor of earning more and more and more, no matter how much we earn, it will never make us happy. In a year or two, the 10,000 square-foot house we slaved to buy will just be a house, nothing more, nothing less. That fancy car with the exclusive logo on the grille will just be another car. We won't gain any more happiness from them than we gained from the shack we used to live in or the beater we used to drive. Instead, our attention will already be fixed on some new prize, a yacht, perhaps, that we are sure will make us happy this time. In reality, that path leads only to unhappiness. If we aren't content with what we have now, we will never be content with anything else either.

The only things that can bring genuine satisfaction to our lives are our relationships with others, and most of all, our relationship with God. If we make Jesus, instead of wealth or pleasure, the cornerstone of our lives, He will never disappoint us. For one thing, unlike the joys of sin, which promise much and deliver little, Jesus is always there. Through His strength, we can learn to be content and indeed happy no matter what our life situation is. Likewise, our bond with Jesus is an eternal one. There's a reason why the Hebrews writer speaks of the "passing" pleasures of sin. Even the pleasure that sin does provide doesn't last. When we engage in illicit sex, we must always fear discovery or some other consequence, and sooner or later, something bad is going to happen. If our lives revolve around our possessions, what happens if we lose our jobs and lose everything else too? Our relationship with Jesus, on the other hand, is always stable and secure. Even death, which ends every other relationship, doesn't end that one. With Christ, we need have no fear.

The writer then continues on to explore more ways we can find contentment in Hebrews 13:7-9. In this subsection, he first tells us that we must remember our **LEADERS**. Throughout the rest of this chapter, the writer uses "leader" as a synonym for "elder", so it is our elders that we must remember. The point here is that elders are more than church officers. They are also examples of the way that we ought to live. Their faith serves as a model for our faith. Just as our faith is bolstered when we read about the heroes of faith in Scripture and the way their faith was rewarded, so too it is encouraging for us to consider our elders and the results of faith and obedience in their lives. When I look at the lives of Joe and John, I see an awful lot of things in their lives that I want for mine. I want to have the good name that they have among men, both inside and outside of the church. I want my marriage to be like theirs. I want my children to grow up to be faithful Christians like theirs are. I want my life to be rich and full of meaning, as their lives are rich and full of meaning. What's more, it's not like Joe and John have gotten these results by accident. I know why they have lived such desirable lives. It's because they turned those lives over to God, and have always trusted in Him, relied on Him, and obeyed Him. They're not lucky men. They're blessed men, and we can have those blessings too if we walk with God.

We can be certain that we will share in these same joys because **JESUS IS THE SAME**. Christ is neither arbitrary nor capricious. If we are faithful to Him, He will be faithful to us. He will give us the same blessings that God has always bestowed upon His people. Satan's promise of pleasure is always a lie, but God's promise of contentment, peace, and joy is always true. However, if we want these things, we're going to have to work for them ourselves too. Part of Satan's lie is that he promises easy happiness if we will only take the shortcut of sin. God's way is harder. God's way requires us to fix our eyes on His goals and to struggle toward those goals. If we give up before we reach them, we won't get the blessing, but that will be our fault, not God's. However, if we invest the effort to live life right, we will find joy that will last as long as life does and even beyond. We can be happy forever, and we can trust in Jesus to get us there.

As part of this, we must beware of **STRANGE TEACHINGS**. In the first century, these strange teachings involved things like obeying the Mosaic rules about eating clean or unclean food. Today, they may involve rejecting the Bible pattern of authority, or denying that God's word calls us to any particular way of life at all. However, no matter what these novel teachings may be, we can be certain that they work to the devil's benefit, not to our benefit. We must be faithful to Christ, and serve Him in the way that He has instructed us, in the way that He has always been served.