

Following Jesus Hebrews 13:7-17

Introduction

Last time we were together in Hebrews, Ben led us through the opening verses of chapter 13, noting that the commands there are an extension of what began at the end of chapter 12. There is a visible way those who belong to invisible kingdom live. When you are trusting in the King of the unshakable kingdom, there is a way of life you pursue.

God-exalting worship, selfless hospitality, prayerful solidarity, purposeful purity, and intentional frugality express faith in Christ and devotion to His forever kingdom. Part of what makes these life patterns stand out is that people who live these ways are running counter to the spirit of the age.

We live for the unshakable kingdom in the face of real enemies and ever-present dangers. We must not fool ourselves into thinking following Jesus is going to be an easy road. So the author of Hebrews reminds us of strategic priorities in fighting this good fight of faith, staying the course, following Jesus all the way home.

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.

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. **9** 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. **10** We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. **11** 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. **12** So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. **14** For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. **15** Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. **16** Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. **17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

1. Follow Christ-Honoring Leaders (7-8, 17).
2. Reject Divergent Teaching (9-10).
3. Bear Reproach with Jesus (11-14).
4. Practice Genuine Worship (15-16).

1. Follow Christ-Honoring Leaders (7-8, 17)

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.

⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Remember—or be mindful of
Leaders who spoke to you the word of God—
undershepherds leading the sheep by means
of and in accord with God’s written Word.

Spoke—seems to have in view leaders who
have gone to be with the Lord, especially
taking into account the following words:
looking back on, scanning closely the
outcome (lit. going out), the result of their
way of life. There is power in the completed
journey of leaders who taught the Word and
lived it.

Reminds us that the word *elders* is the most
common word for those who lead the church
through the Word (*overseers* and *pastors* the
other interchangeable terms). Elders are by
definition spiritually mature men who lead by
example. It’s not that they are a cut above
everyone else with no flaws or sins. The
character qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and
Titus 1 are not so much extraordinary as
exemplary—living examples of what the
Christian life should look like for any believer.

If every Christian you know seems to be putting on a show, just faking it on Sundays, it's hard to hold fast to the faith. But when you've known mature Christians whose lives public and private were in line with the faith they taught, your own faith is strengthened.

We don't worship leaders in the Word. We imitate their faith. Their faith—their reliance—was in Jesus. It points away from themselves to Christ. He is always the same. Leaders falter. Leaders die. Jesus remains with you all the days—yesterday, today, and forever.

Paul to the Corinthians—

1 Corinthians 11:1

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Context

1 Corinthians 10:31-33

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Imitate the faith and life conduct of those who faithfully teach the Word.

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Our culture takes a dim view of leadership and kicks against authority, so it is easy for us to adopt the same spirit of self-determination. Distrust of anyone in leadership is pervasive, along with plenty of anecdotal evidence that leaders are never to be trusted. But as believers, we have to come to grips with Scriptural teaching on submission to God-ordained authority.

Because civil government also carries enforcement power, we more easily adapt to obeying the law, if but to avoid the penalties of not doing so. When we are small children, we respond in the same way toward our parents because we don't want to be disciplined.

As we grow older, we learn to avoid what causes us trouble, but we are not necessarily more submissive or obedient, nor do we naturally show honor to whom it is due.

When it comes to church life, we want to feel that our leaders are our friends, but we often know enough of their weaknesses and flaws that we are reluctant to obey them.

So what do we do with a passage like this? First, consider what kind of leaders the text describes: leaders whose conduct sets an example of living by faith; leaders who teach the inerrant and absolutely authoritative Word of God; leaders who are losing sleep (literal meaning) for the sake of the flock; leaders who give an account to God. You are part of God's flock. Jesus is the Great Shepherd, the Good Shepherd. According to Acts 20 the Holy Spirit Himself has made these Word-centered, exemplary men of faith your overseers, whose job it is to feed and lead the sheep and to protect them from wolves and from anyone teaching twisted things even within the congregation. They do not lord it over the flock (1 Peter 5). Their authority is that of the Word, the Spirit who appointed them, and the Son who gave them to the church.

To disobey leaders like this is to disobey God Himself, to shut your ears to His Word, to ignore His Spirit, to belittle His Son. If they are indeed godly men teaching divine truth, then obeying them benefits you and not doing so harms you. And your resistance actually makes their work much harder. Nothing grieves a godly leader more than to have those he loves refuse to follow the good path and instead choose sidepaths that lead to pain and sorrow.

Obey faithful shepherds for your benefit and for their joy.

1 Thessalonians 2:13, 19

13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?

1 Thessalonians 3:8

For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

3 John 1:4

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Christ has given prophets, apostles, and pastor-teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry so that we all grow up into doctrinal maturity and Christ-like practical maturity, building up one another in love.

To survive and thrive in this world, let these God-given leaders be the blessing God intended them to be for you as you give yourself to following Jesus.

2. Reject Divergent Teaching (9-10).

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.

Don't be fooled and led away by any teaching that deviates from God's Word, whether old traditions or new heresies.

In part the role of leaders who teach the Word is to protect God's people from false teaching in all its different forms.

Acts 20:28-31

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

What kind of deviant teaching threatens the first-century readers of Hebrews?

The writer addresses dietary codes that allege to have spiritual benefit or significance. These are in part a return to the old covenant dietary restrictions of Judaism. They were not spiritually beneficial in and of themselves, but their intent had been to keep Israel separate from the surrounding pagan nations, protecting them from idolatrous cultures. Christ made it clear that we are defiled not by what goes into our mouths, but by what comes out, because a corrupt heart expresses itself with corrupt speech. With the great commission to make disciples of all nations, God had relaxed the dietary laws so that the Jewish purveyors of the gospel could easily move among Gentiles (Peter and Cornelius, Paul and the Gentile churches).

The ceremonies of the tabernacle and temple pointed to Christ, the perfect sacrifice. He intercedes not in an earthly temple, but in heaven itself at the right hand of God. Priests ate from the earthly altar. We partake from a heavenly altar through Christ our sacrifice and High Priest.

So part of the false teaching was rooted in old traditions connected to a different time and to different needs. There is evidence that the dietary laws also became part of new heresies, including the growing prevalence of gnostic ideas. In the name of superior or secret "knowledge," ideas borrowed from

Greek dualism—spirit is good and matter is evil—infected Christian thought. Asceticism—punishing the body for spiritual advancement, along with worship of angels and mystical ceremonies, found their way into Christian theology, creating hybrid heresies.

Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits [principles] of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:16-23

16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. **17** These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. **18** Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, **19** and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— **21** “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” **22** (referring to things that all

perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Don't be fooled and led away by any teaching that deviates from God's Word, whether old traditions or new heresies.

Even well-meaning leaders make mistakes in their teaching, but if you keep testing what you hear by the Word of God, you will be protected from what deviates from it. Be very careful where you are getting your doctrine—especially in an age like ours where deviant teaching of all sorts is literally at your fingertips. What is the worldview of those you're listening to and reading? Are they true Christ-followers?

It is not uncommon to hear church members express opinions rooted in anti-Christian thought. If you find yourself regularly outraged at gospel-believing brothers and sisters in Christ, along with joining in trashing gospel-preaching leaders, there's a good chance you are regularly drinking at the poison well of those who are self-identified rejecters of Jesus Himself.

Get out of the virtual world into the real world. Build face-to-face relationships with your brothers and sisters in Christ, instead of thinking you know them from your newsfeed or social media interactions. Be careful about letting teachers you don't personally know train you, while you neglect the teaching of those you do know.

Don't worry about being traditional or current. Be biblical, and you will hold fast the traditions that come from God and you will always be relevant.

Cut yourself off from the body and the gifts shared there, and you will spiral downward. You will become more and more susceptible to false teaching.

3. Bear Reproach with Jesus (11-14).

¹¹ 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. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.

The sacrifices burned outside the camp were symbolic of God's judgment being diverted

from the people to their substitute. Jesus bore God's wrath for us. His own blood makes atonement for us.

The writer of Hebrews also connects the rejection of Jesus to the sacrifices burned outside the camp of Israel. Remember that the chief priests, guardians of temple worship, and the scribes, guardians of the Word, both rejected Jesus and treated Him as a blasphemer and insurrectionist. Jesus exposed their worship as corrupted by greed and their biblical teaching as twisted by manmade rules. The leaders were too in love with their own glory to seek the glory of God by trusting in His Son, the Messiah. So they crucified Him outside of Jerusalem.

If we are to stay true to Jesus, we will also suffer rejection and reproach.

Jesus taught that those who wanted to be His disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Him. The world hated Him. He predicted that the world would hate us also because we belong to Him.

Paul calls it the fellowship of His sufferings (Philippians 3:10).

2 Timothy 3:12

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Hebrews 11 has already chronicled some of the ways people of faith have suffered for the sake of Christ. Persecution can come in the form of slander, or verbal abuse, or confiscation of property, exile, imprisonment, torture, even death. What could make even losing everything for Jesus worth it? Knowing that you have an eternal inheritance no one can take from you. We can bear up under the scorn and mistreatment from this temporal world when our hearts seek the everlasting city to come. We are not expecting to find heaven here except at best a pale reflection of what is yet to come. "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through."
"The fields of hope in which I sow are harvested in heaven."

One of the main reasons professing Christians modify their beliefs and practices is the pressure they feel from the world to conform. But Romans 12:2 commands us not to be pressed into the world's mold, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can please God according to His will. To stay true to Jesus you must be ready and willing to suffer with Him and for Him.

4. Practice Genuine Worship (15-16).

¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do

not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Those who rebuked Christians for abandoning the old covenant religious ritual considered them apostate. The pagans called them atheists because they would not worship their pantheon of idols.

Continual gratitude (15)

Continual generosity (16)

But genuine Christians engage in real, spiritual worship that shows up in everyday life, not just in a worship service. Christ changes who we are from the inside out through the power of the Holy Spirit He gives to indwell every true believer.

Their lives are characterized by love for God and love for their fellow human beings. Their sacrifices are not mere offerings of animals, grain, or drink, but of themselves, their hearts for the glory of God and the good of others.

You can engage in this kind of worship every day.

First, acknowledge outloud (with your lips) God's good gifts to you. Give Him praise all day long.

Second, look for ways to share your possessions, your time, and your love with

those around you. Seize the opportunities to do so.

Conclusion

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Discussion Questions

1. Who are some past leaders who taught the Word and lived out their faith who impacted your life, and how did they do so?
2. What are some key differences between leaders you should imitate and obey and those you should not?
3. What advantages come from imitating and obeying truly godly leaders, and what disadvantages come from not doing so?
4. The false teaching that threatened first-century believers was rooted in old covenant tradition combined with new ideas borrowed from the prevailing Greek philosophy and culture of the times. What insights does that give you regarding what to watch out for today?

5. Where are you most likely to find reliable truth taught and practiced and to experience the benefits of it?
6. What have you found helps you overcome being intimidated by the disapproval of the prevailing world culture?
7. Since we are in the world to make disciples of all ethnicities, how do we steer a course that is sensitive to cultural settings but does not cave to their unbiblical elements?
8. What are some daily reasons for you to express gratitude and praise to God? Why is it important to voice your loving thanks to Him?
9. What are some examples of your opportunities to share what you have and engage in loving works that benefit others?