

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Following Jesus... **ESPECIALLY when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

Therefore...

(concluding thoughts from Hebrews 13:1-17)

Study #16

Introduction: From “What?” to “So what?” ...

We’re about to wrap up our time in Hebrews, having spent four months exploring this deep, rich, fascinating New Testament letter. (And who knows, maybe we’ll be back next Sunday for one more look at Hebrews...)

By now, we know what the major themes of the letter, the “*Whats?*” of Hebrews are. They are:

- (1) Jesus is superior to anything and to anyone else.
- (2) We should keep following Jesus, no matter what.
- (3) A rich inheritance awaits Jesus’ faithful follower.

Those are the “*Whats?*” Today, we hear about the “*So whats?*” - or the “*Therefores...*” of specific instruction.¹ Based on all that we have heard from the beginning, this is how we are to live.

First, we are to walk in kindness and love.

¹ Some say that this final chapter is an add-on to the letter and that it doesn’t fit with the rest of the book in tone or content. (Some even believe that the Apostle Paul wrote - only - chapter 13.) I disagree. I think the same author wrote all thirteen chapters and that the last chapter fits beautifully.

Live Well (13:1-6)

Walk in Kindness (vv. 1-3)

To the Christian family

[13:1] Let love of the brothers and sisters continue.

The author is thinking local. Love one another. We are to love those within the congregation of which we are a part.

You believe in Jesus? Great. You are a part of a faith-in-Jesus family. You and I are family.² But that we might NOT love each other is evident from the fact that the author urges us to do so.

We read back in chapter 10 (vv. 24-25) that it was the habit of some Christians to back away from regular connections with other Christians. So, this exhortation was needed.

They were to renew and then continue to love each other well. So are we.

Loving each other probably would have looked in the first century about the way it looks in 2024.

We are to watch out for each other, encourage and pray for each other, serve and help each other, meet with and eat with each other.³

He follows that with a second exhortation.

To strangers

[2] Do not neglect hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.

² The Greek word “philadelphia” literally means “love of the brethren and is pronounced just like we pronounce the name of the city.

³ See John 13:34-25.

The practice in the first century church was for Christians to provide hospitality to traveling missionaries.

If someone knocked on your door, told you he was an evangelist or as a church planter, you would provide food and lodging for as long as he needed it, even if you'd never seen him before.

The author says that the practice of hospitality might involve us in surprisingly exciting adventures.

For instance, Abraham welcomed and served a meal to three men, one of whom turned out to be the pre-incarnate Christ (Both Moses, the author of Genesis and Abraham called one of the "angels" Yahweh). (Genesis 18)⁴

It has been among the greatest privileges our church has had to help "**strangers**" who serve Jesus in lots of places we, personally, don't or can't go.

One concrete way to show love is by way of hospitality. Here is another one.

To prisoners

[3] Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are badly treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.⁵

If you were living in a place where Christians were being publicly persecuted, it might be tempting to avoid associating with them. It could lead to guilt by association. Maybe even trouble by association.

The author tells us to resist that temptation on the strength of the argument that we, too, are "***in the body.***"

⁴ Greek "*angelos*" can mean *angel* or *messenger*. Either way, there is great honor in showing hospitality.

⁵ Onesiphorus cared for Paul while Paul was in prison. He was not ashamed of Paul's chains. (2 Timothy 1:16)

The thought is that the readers were living in a physical body just like the persecuted were. Thus, "*How would you like to be treated if you were suffering like this?*"⁶

For this reason, we talk a lot here about serving the persecuted church around the world. Those who are persecuted are our family.

Then, he moves from an emphasis on kindness to purity.

Walk in Purity (v. 4)

[4] Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.

What prompted the honoring comment?

There are two questions that this verse raises. Here's the first one: "*Why include the comment about honoring marriage and the marriage bed?*"

Well, it's because it became common in the early church to think that there was a moral superiority to celibacy and to asceticism.

Believers were sometimes quick to view the body and its appetites - including the sexual appetite - as inherently sinful.⁷

But the Apostle Paul warned against that tendency. He urged, "*Don't forbid marriage!*" (1 Timothy 4:3ff...)

He told those who were married to happily be sexually active with each other. (See 1 Corinthians 7)

So, the author of Hebrews might have been fighting against this mindset when he wrote.

⁶ This is not a reference to the universal body of Christ, the church.

⁷ Many scholars believe that this was a major factor leading the early church to embrace monasticism.

We should all know that the Bible teaches that not only is there nothing wrong with marriage and sexual intimacy in marriage. There is everything right with it. God commends it.

The second question raised here is, “*Why give the warning?*”

What prompted the warning comment?

[4b]...for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.

He probably gave the warning because there were those who thought that God didn’t much care whether people engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage.

The Bible here - and elsewhere - tells us that God cares very much.⁸ And the reason He cares is not because He is a cosmic killjoy.

Sex outside of the marriage bond is prohibited because the most intimate human expression between a man and a woman requires the protection of the ultimate personal commitment.

Sexual intimacy is important enough that it needs the protection of marriage.

God will judge those who engage in sexual behavior outside of marriage. This includes believers, who may fail in this area.⁹

Abstaining from sexual intimacy outside of marriage means going against the cultural current. God says to wait until the commitment is solid and public, as in married.

Then, we move from a consideration of purity to the theme of contentment.

⁸ This prohibition against adultery repeats one of the Old Testament’s Ten Commandments. And it has already been warned against at Hebrews 12:16.

⁹ See 1 Thessalonians 4:4-7 for strong words about the need for sexual purity and self-control.

Walk in Contentment (vv. 5-6)

Instability is a given

I’ll start here with a comment about the general instability of, well, everything.

The author of Hebrews has already told us what we already knew - that everything we see now is shakable. (12:27)

This past week’s stock market ride gives us a picture of that. So do national politics, expensive goods and services, culture clashes, and Middle East turmoil.

The first century readers of this letter faced threats to their safety and had suffered the seizure of their property. They had suffered that loss “**joyfully**” (10:34).

In the face of universal shakability, our author says, “*Embrace contentment.*”

Contentment is a must

[5] Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have...

In times of great uncertainty and insecurity and instability, the tendency is to cling. We face the temptation to cling to what we have, to not be generous; to live from a posture of scarcity, not abundance.¹⁰

To be content is to NOT cling. It is to hold with an open hand. It is for me to be satisfied that what I have is enough.

And in an unstable, shakable world, we find contentment in a trusting relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

Trust is the way

¹⁰ The 8th (don’t steal) and 10th (don’t covet) Commandments address theft and greed. Check Philippians 4:11, 19 and 1 Timothy 6:6-10 for Paul’s thoughts about contentedness. See Matthew 8:20 for Jesus on contentment.

[5] Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER ABANDON YOU," [6] so that we confidently say, "THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?"

Our dollars may leave us. Our Savior never will. Friends may come and go. Health and popularity and safety are all fleeting.

God stays. He walks with us through the darkest, deepest night. In a very shakable world, we find stability and contentment in Jesus.

The great **"Therefore..."** of Hebrews in terms of lifestyle may be summed up by kindness to those in need, purity and holiness, and trusting contentment.

In what remains, the author invites us to live in light of the truth we know about Jesus.

The beautiful, powerful end to this letter assures us that if we want to stay solid, we will stay fixed and focused on Him.

He begins and ends this section with a reference to those who had led and taught and modeled the Jesus Way for these readers.

Live in Jesus' Truth (13:7-17)

Live by the Essential Jesus Message (vv. 7-9, 17)

Remember your first / former teachers (vv. 7, 17)

Here are words about the first leaders.

[7] Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their way of life, imitate their faith.¹¹

¹¹ Remember that we believe that the letter to the Hebrews was written prior to AD 70 when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by Rome.

And here is what he says about the current leaders.

[17] Obey your leaders and submit to them - for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account - so that they may do this with joy, not groaning; for this would be unhelpful for you.

The original leaders were the ones who first taught these Christians what they needed to know about Jesus and about life in Jesus. The current leaders were teaching the same things.

Both groups of leaders had done a really good job of teaching, training, and modeling the ways of Jesus.¹²

They were faithful. They lived well and they taught well.

The author knew that these leaders were concerned for the condition of the readers' souls.

He knew that they knew that they would one day give an account for how they had shepherded Jesus' people.¹³

But those in the churches will also give account as to how well they submitted to godly leadership and the sound doctrine that the leaders provided.

If followers make the jobs of leaders difficult, the leaders might get discouraged and lead less well. That doesn't help anybody.

¹² Let's suppose that the author of Hebrews was a convert of the original apostles. If so, then the first teachers of the readers of this letter were probably the author's contemporaries. The current crop of leaders would have been contemporaries of the readers, themselves.

¹³ This is in view in 1 Corinthians 3. See also 1 Peter 5:1-4 for the stewardship of leaders (elders) in a Christian congregation.

So, between the brackets of the final section of this letter, where the author tells us to respect and follow the teaching and the faith of the godly leaders in the church, he brings lessons to live by.

Lesson #1. What you have been taught about Jesus is still and will always be true.

Remember the never-changing truth of Jesus (v. 8)

[8] Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and forever.

In His nature and essence, Jesus Christ is immutable. He doesn't change, age to age.

Our Savior is unfailingly reliable. Jesus is the solid Rock on which our lives and our faith rest.

That is all true, but that is only one part of what is the point of Hebrew 13:8.

The second (and the most relevant to Hebrews) is that even when Christians leaders die or leave, their teachings about Jesus remain true.

What was accepted as true by the readers at the beginning of their walk with Jesus is still true.

The truths that we have learned about Jesus continue on through our lives, no matter what the winds of culture - or even the winds of theology - may say. Jesus is who He has always been.

Lesson #2 follows: Don't fall for any weird teachings.

Refuse new and strange doctrines (v. 9)

[9] Do not be misled by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited.

Don't focus on food (externals)

Stay away from teachings that don't strengthen the heart. And the author mentions food.¹⁴

There are numerous suggestions as to what is being referred to here with respect to "**food**."¹⁵

I think that the author of Hebrews is speaking to a problem that had been addressed and resolved early on by the church of Jesus.

Not long after the beginning of the Christian movement, the church began to apply the teachings of Jesus to their life in Jesus.

Among the first things they got straightened out was food.

At the first major decision-making conference of the church (we call it "The Jerusalem Council"; Acts 15), the church rebuked a faction that was requiring Gentiles to get circumcised - and with that, adhere to the rest of the Mosaic Law.

I assume that the church's leaders had Jesus' words about food in mind as they debated the issues.

One of the changes that Jesus brought about was the idea that all foods were to be considered "**clean**." (because it wasn't what went into a man's stomach that defiled him, but what proceeded out of his mouth that defiled him; Matthew 15:11; Mark 7:20)

So, in addition to not requiring circumcision, Gentiles were free to eat anything they wanted to eat, kosher or not.¹⁶

¹⁴As we have already seen (Hebrews 5:11-14), the readers were immature and unstable, and hence were being led astray by false teachings.

¹⁵ The author could be referring to: (1) food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols, (2) the bread and cup of communion, (3) ascetic fasting practices common among some groups (like the Essenes), and (4) the offerings of the Levitical sacrificial system. (from some of which the priests were allowed to eat; especially the Passover lamb which all the Jews were allowed to eat)

¹⁶ The one exception was that they should not eat things that had been strangled (i.e., with the blood), as that would be an offensive stumbling-block to the Jews.

Everyone who believed in Jesus - both Jews and Gentiles - were free from all the restrictions of the Mosaic Law by the work of Jesus.

Everybody knew that. But soon, "***varied and strange teachings***" began to seep into the church.

Among them were teachings about food, like the need to keep kosher. That might have been especially appealing to a Christian Jew, given that this was his cultural heritage.

And there was nothing wrong with keeping kosher.

But keeping those rules - and other rules associated with the Old Covenant - did nothing to foster spiritual health. They didn't promote next steps with Jesus. They were, spiritually speaking, useless.

What was important was grace. Grace strengthens the heart.

The heart is strengthened by grace

Some teachers were saying, and some say today that what a person eats has something to do with getting closer to God. That's silly nonsense.

Legalistic rules-keeping isn't the pathway to spiritual maturity. Neither are religious rituals. The path to spiritual growth is the path of grace.

Always keep at the front of your mind that in Jesus, God has given you what you did not deserve (forgiveness; reconciliation; love) and has not given you what you did deserve (condemnation).

As Paul wrote, ***[2 Corinthians 8:9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.***

Food is good. It goes into the stomach and strengthens the body. But only grace strengthens the heart.

The grace that strengthens the heart flows from a growing appreciation for the death that Jesus died for us all.

We're now near the end of this letter, and the author gives us an image here that we'll never forget.

What we are about to read, is, as one of my seminary profs said many years ago, "*one of the loveliest passages in the New Testament.*"

Join Jesus Outside the Camp (vv. 10-14)

Jesus' better sacrifice (vv. 10-11)

[10] We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. [11] For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the Holy Place by the high priest as an offering for sin are burned outside the camp.

Under the Old Covenant, the Jews had their own altar - a place of worship - at the tabernacle and then later in the temple.

Referring to the offerings of the Jews' most holy day, the Day of Atonement, the author points out that the animals on that day were not burned on the altar as was the case in other offerings.¹⁷

On that day, the animals were killed inside the tabernacle area. Then, their carcasses were carried "***outside the camp***"¹⁸ where they were burned.

The image is of the animals taking on themselves the sins of the people. By removing the bodies of these animals from their midst, the Jews were symbolically removing everything associated with their sin.

And that "***altar***" that the author mentions in verse 10, our altar? That's the cross of Jesus.

¹⁷ The priests ate from some of these sacrifices. They did not eat from the offering of the Day of Atonement.

¹⁸ The author is picturing the time when the Israelites were in the wilderness, when the tabernacle was in use.

The Jesus way (v. 12-14)

Jesus suffered outside the gate

[12] Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the gate, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood.

In the New Testament, Jesus is frequently referred to as the Passover Lamb. He is **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”** (John 1:29) In fact, He was crucified on the day of Passover.

But here, the author of Hebrews links Jesus’ death to the annual Day of Atonement, when the Jewish High Priest went into the Most Holy Place and offered up a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

Then, that animal was carried outside of the camp to be burned.

Golgotha (*“the place of the skull”* where crucifixions took place in Jerusalem) was an unholy, ugly place of defilement.

The crucifying place couldn’t have been placed inside the city. It had to be placed outside the city.

That Jesus was crucified **“outside the gate”**¹⁹ speaks to His identification with the world for which He died, just like the animals that were taken outside the camp represented sinful people.²⁰

Jesus was considered unclean and unholy. He was rejected by the Jews and by the Romans.²¹ He was taken out with the trash.

Let us join Him outside the gate / camp

¹⁹ That is, outside the gates of the city of Jerusalem, corresponding to **“outside the camp”** of the Old Testament sacrifices.

²⁰ It is important, too, to note that Jesus was not killed in the temple or at the altar. The location of His death symbolized the end of the old order.

²¹ We read (Exodus 40) that Moses set up a **“tent of meeting”** separate from the tabernacle, and outside the camp. God descended upon this tent to meet with Moses. This **“outside the camp”** tent was necessary because the people’s sins had defiled the camp. Communion with God had to be outside the camp.

[13] So then, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.

The temptation for the readers of Hebrews was to go back inside the camp, enter through the gate and return to Judaism.

That temptation would have died with this invitation to join Jesus, who was rejected, reproached, outside the camp.

Anyone of us who faces the temptation to stop following Jesus, go to where it is safe and comfortable, avoid persecution or hardship or suffering only has to look at the measure of Jesus’ love to find reason to join Him outside the camp and to bear His reproach.²²

We will gladly leave it all behind for His sake who gave His all for us.

We will join Him even if it means hardship, saying **“No!”** to temptation, rejection from others, going counter-cultural, and even persecution.

Joining Jesus outside the gate and bearing His reproach is the path to follow to find the lasting city we long for.

Our ability to accept rejection for Jesus is directly tied to our adopting the outlook and mindset of a pilgrim.

Our home is not inside the gate / camp

[14] For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.

Just to be clear: Whoever believes in Jesus, the One who died for their sins and rose again, has eternal life. The believer will never face God’s condemnation, is forever God’s son or daughter, and will enter the eternal kingdom.

²² See Hebrews 11:26 and Moses choosing the reproaches of Christ as better than the treasures of Egypt.

But the privilege of reigning with Jesus in that kingdom is reserved for those who walk with Jesus in this life.

The rich inheritance and reward of being His *“companion”* and *“partner”* and *“friend”* is for the one who perseveres.

We - like Abraham - are looking for a lasting city with a solid foundation whose builder and architect is God.²³

Retreating to traditional respectability is vain. We have HERE no lasting city.

So, we’re looking for that New Jerusalem. We will reign in it IF we follow Jesus now.

Offer Fitting Sacrifices to God Through Jesus (vv. 15-16)

[15] Through Him then, let’s continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips praising His name. [16] And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

We approach God boldly, not through a human priest or mediator, but through the One who loves us best.

We continually give thanks to Him who gave Himself for us. Today, we bring the sacrifice of praise, worship, and service.

Conclusion:

The letter to the Hebrews speaks to us today. It’s message of final hope in Jesus’ atoning sacrifice and of becoming His

“companions” who will reign with Him in glory inspires us to follow Him fully now.

If faithfully following Jesus is not your current story, it can be. But nothing changes until something changes. Change is possible.

You can turn around and take a next step with Jesus into faith and obedience. Today. If you do, you will hear on that day, *“Well done!”*

²³ The security of earthly cities, systems, institutions are illusory, however solid and stable they may appear. Judaism had already shown us that even God’s temple is not secure. Babylon destroyed it. Rome soon would.