

Our Heart Response

Hebrews 13:7-17

This morning we wrap up our sermon series in the book of Hebrews (this is sermon #23). Brian and I began teaching through Hebrews in August. We trust that God has used this series in your life. Today's passage (Hebrews 13:7-17) urges us to respond appropriately in three different ways: to respond appropriately to former spiritual leaders, to respond appropriately to God Himself, and to respond appropriately to current spiritual leaders.

To be honest, this isn't the most urgent passage in the book of Hebrews. Other passages are a LOT more intense and a Lot more urgent than this one. This passage doesn't contain a fierce warning like some passages in Hebrews; and it doesn't promise all sorts of blessing if you do what it says.

And so what does this passage do for us? This passage teaches us ***how to live from heart in these three different ways***. The core challenge of the book of Hebrews is to "run with endurance the race set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). If we are going to run with endurance (i.e., persevere), we will need to live from the heart. You won't persevere if you live a superficial life, if you "settle," or if you go through the motions. But if you live from the heart, you are much more likely to persevere through the tough times.

I trust that God has something important for you in our passage today. First, let's consider:

Our Heart Response to Former Spiritual Leaders (Hebrews 13:7-9) In these verses our author urges the Hebrews to remain tethered to the truth of the gospel. He does this by encouraging them to imitate the faith of those who led them in the past.

7 Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

Down in verse 17 our author will mention the Hebrews' current spiritual leaders. But here he has them remember their former spiritual leaders. Our author urges the Hebrews to do three things in relation to these former leaders: ***remember*** them, ***consider*** the fruit of their lives, and ***imitate*** their faith.

Instead of forgetting them and the influence they had had in their lives, they were first supposed to remember them. Second, he mentions "considering the result of their conduct" or "consider the outcome of their way of life" (O'Brien, p. 516). This statement suggests that these former leaders were now dead; the result/outcome of their conduct was now evident. They had run with endurance the race that had been set before them. Just as the Hebrews were encouraged in chapter 11 to consider the lives of old testament saints and just as they were told in Hebrews 12:2 to fix their eyes on Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of their faith, they are now told to consider the lives of their former spiritual leaders. Their lives were another tangible example of living by faith.

Third, and not surprisingly, our author says, “imitate their faith.” Good spiritual leaders aren’t perfect (only Jesus was perfect). But spiritual leaders do provide a real life example of what it means to live by faith. They live transparent lives so that others can see their faith. They demonstrate what faith looks like when you’re doing well, when you’re struggling, when you experience success (at work, at home, in the church), and when you experience failure in those same contexts. Good spiritual leaders don’t merely project an image to follow; they provide a tangible example of real-life faith. Their example is important even after they die.

One of my spiritual mentors was Dave Simmons. Dave played linebacker at Georgia Tech in college; after college he played for the Cowboys, the St. Louis Cardinals, and the New Orleans Saints. Brenda and I worked at the camp in South Mississippi that he founded and directed. Dave died in a car wreck in the mid-90s. In many ways Dave had a tragic, painful life; personal issues plagued him as long as I knew him. But he was one of the first people to teach me the Scriptures. More than that he gave me a love for the studying and teaching the Bible. He was passionate about teaching the Bible in a way that really engages people’s lives. When I remember Dave and consider the fruit of his life, I am motivated to “imitate his faith.” I would encourage you think about the people from your past who might have played a significant role in your life spiritually. Remember them, consider the fruit of their lives, and imitate their faith. Their examples can help you live from the heart.

Verse 8 might seem like a random spiritual nugget. But it’s actually the core theological reason for remembering former leaders and the influence of their lives. Here it is:

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

If Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday (when their former spiritual leaders had influenced them), then they certainly shouldn’t drift from what they’d been taught. Back in chapter 2, he had mentioned that when they first heard the Word it was confirmed “by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (2:3-4). Maybe you can think of times in the past when God has unmistakably spoken to you or done something in your life. Without living in the past, it’s important to remember that Jesus Christ is still the same today as He was when He did that work in your life. If God seems remote to you right now, it’s all the more important for you to remain tethered to your spiritual past. Even if He is working in your life in very different ways than in the past, Jesus Christ is the same today as yesterday.

The fact that Jesus Christ is the same “forever” (i.e., in the future) means that there will never be a reason to abandon your confidence in Him. That seems to be what was happening with the Hebrews. That’s why we find this warning in verse 9:

9 Do not be carried away 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.

Our author was concerned that they might be lured away from the solid teaching they'd received "by varied and strange teachings." These teachings were apparently a mixture of current Jewish teachings and old covenant law. He mentions that "it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods." Apparently false teachers were promoting dietary regulations and Jewish festivals as essential for spiritual maturity. He points out that "those who were so occupied" with such teachings didn't actually benefit from them. Grace, not your diet, is what strengthens a person spiritually.

Our author is bringing the Hebrews (and us!) back to the truth that we need to remain faithful to the core teachings about Jesus Christ that we've received. Those of us who are believers need to watch our lives so that we don't drift away from the gospel we first believed. In this way we can continue to live from the heart.

Our Heart Response to God Himself (Hebrews 13:10-16) Verses 10 through 12 reintroduce a theme that has been prominent throughout Hebrews: the new covenant provides blessings that the old covenant never could. Our author will argue that we should therefore respond to God in the new covenant from the heart. He begins in verse 10 by making a contrast.

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

The altar "we have" in the new covenant - the place where the once-for-all sacrifice was made - is the cross of Jesus. Because of that altar (because of the cross), we experience many different things: we experience life in abundance, we come boldly to the throne of God in prayer, we have assurance of a home with God for eternity, etc. Our author points out that "those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat" from that altar. In other words, those who are still living under the old covenant can't experience the blessings of the new covenant. This is one more reason why the Hebrews shouldn't be "carried away by strange . . . teachings" related to Jewish food laws.

In verses 11 and 12 the author reinforces the idea that priests don't always have a right to eat what is sacrificed on the altar. Specifically, on the Day of Atonement the bull and the goat sacrificed were not eaten at the altar; they were taken outside the camp and burned. Other sacrifices offered at other times were eaten by the priests as part of the ritual. But not on the Day of Atonement.

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

The Day of Atonement foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus. Just as the animal was burned outside the camp, Jesus also "suffered outside the gate." The gospels make a point of saying that Jesus was crucified outside of Jerusalem (John 19:20 tells us that "Jesus was crucified near the city."). His sacrifice wasn't merely "an offering for sin"; His

sacrifice was the once-for-all sacrifice that “sanctified” (made holy) the people permanently.

Throughout the book of Hebrews we’ve been encouraged to enter into the place where Jesus is: into the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus is at the right hand of the Father (e.g., 6:19-20). In verse 13 we are once again told to go where Jesus is. But this time we’re encouraged to “go out to Him outside the camp.”

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

In the old covenant system, anything outside the camp was considered disgraceful. Jesus wasn’t sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem; He was sacrificed in a place considered disgraceful: outside the camp. Our author seems to be making the simple point that if you want the benefits of Jesus’ death, you have to identify with him by going outside the camp also. In that day, going outside the camp meant laying aside the old covenant and enduring the reproach of Christ under the new covenant.

In our day “going outside the camp” also means identifying with Jesus in a rather comprehensive way. We endure whatever reproach/insult comes with speaking the name of Jesus and doing the works of Jesus. The first heart response to the blessing of the new covenant is to **go outside the camp**. Instead of living a safe, superficial life, we identify with Jesus in a comprehensive way.

In verse 14 the author once again points out that this world is not our home; so it’s really okay if we experience the reproach of Christ outside the camp.

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

The second heart response to the blessing of the new covenant is to **offer appropriate sacrifices**. The old covenant stipulated that very specific sacrifices needed to be brought to God; sometimes it was grain, other times a bull or a goat, other times a pigeon. As we’ve seen in Hebrews, Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins. We don’t need to offer God any sacrifices in relation to our sins. So what kind of sacrifices are now appropriate? Verses 15 and 16 tell us.

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

Our author uses worship language to describe how we should respond to God. Through Jesus we can “continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.” In case we aren’t clear what he’s talking about, he clarifies, “that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.” We can do this in corporate worship as well as throughout the rest of the week. Think about singing on Sunday mornings, for example. Instead of just mouthing the words or just watching others worship, you and I are responsible to respond on a heart level. Through singing we can offer a sacrifice of praise to God Himself.

In verse 16 he tells us, “And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” “Doing good and sharing” are another type of sacrifice we bring to God. Paul spoke about being “zealous for good deeds” in Titus 2:14 and about being “generous and ready to share” in 1 Timothy 6:18. This verse reminds us that our good deeds and our sharing can be sacrifices that are pleasing to God. This suggests that we should consciously do what we do “unto the Lord.”

Think about the good deeds that you do every day: cooking, cleaning, tying shoes, saying kind words to coworkers, praying for people, etc. Instead of doing these things mindlessly (or worse grudgingly), we can consciously offer these good works up to God as a sacrifice. When you share something you have with others, you can do so unto the Lord. Isn't it amazing that God Himself can be pleased with the simple things we do for others?!?! When we consciously offer up a sacrifice of praise or when we do good works and share with others unto God - instead of unto no one in particular - we begin to experience Him on a heart level.

Our Heart Response to Current Spiritual Leaders (Hebrews 13:17) Whereas verse 7 had mentioned their former leaders, this verse mentions their current spiritual leaders. The description in this verse suggests that our author has in mind elders. Elders are the foundational spiritual leadership in the local church. Their basic job description is to “shepherd the flock of God” willingly and sacrificially. Elders aren't supposed to act like bosses or little dictators. They're supposed to lead by example, living the type of life that everybody in the church should pursue.

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

“Obey” and “submit” are strong words. The term translated obey carries the connotation of trusting in someone (Philippians 1:14, Luke 18:9). The term translated submit means to yield to someone. If this were the only verse in the New Testament that spoke about leadership in the local church, you might get a rather authoritarian view of church leadership. But this is only one of many verses that speak about the dynamics between leaders and the rest of the church. 1 Peter 5:5, for example, tells both elders and others, “all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Just like you and I put on clothes for the day, we should all “wear” humility in our interaction with each other.

Nevertheless, there is still the need for the church to follow its elders' lead. This verse is advocating that the church invite the elders' leadership instead of resisting it. This verse doesn't assume that the leaders are always right or that they'll never make bad decisions. It mentions that they “will give an account”; one day they will answer to God Himself. But it does assume that they are doing their basic job of “keep[ing] watch over your souls.” If your leaders are looking out for your well-being and not merely serving their own interests, you should be eager to follow their lead. You will follow them because they are leading you deeper into the will of God.

That second sentence in verse 17 is really music to my ears: “Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” If a church (or just a few people within a church) want to cause its leadership “grief” it’s pretty easy to do. You can cause grief through grumbling, through gossiping, through dividing into factions, through not resolving conflicts, through holding grudges, through outbursts of anger, etc. But causing your leadership grief is akin to the proverbial “cutting off your nose to spite your face”: “for this would be unprofitable for you.” This statement suggests that the entire church benefits when leaders lead joyfully. Your soul reaps the benefit when your elders find great satisfaction in leading the church.

I realize that it’s sometimes hard following church leadership - even here at Faith. You may not agree with every decision our leadership makes. But even when you disagree it’s still important that you are “for” our leadership on a heart level. Even though we sometimes get it wrong, we really love this church and want God’s best for Faith. We really want to carry out our responsibilities with joy (and not with grief). And so we invite you to welcome our leadership and to encourage through prayer and words and love.

How we conduct ourselves in the local church really matters; it affects people’s lives in deep, deep ways. I didn’t always believe that. When I was growing up I heard that the main difference between the local church and the country club was that the country club had more strict entrance requirements. The implication was that the local church didn’t really matter; after all, all a church does is sit in a room together for an hour a week. . . .

Nothing could be further from the truth. It matters how we treat our leadership; it matters how we treat each other; it matters how we treat the community around us (that’s why we want to “Love Manhattan”); and it matters how we treat God. Life is too short to do anything other than live from the heart.