

Refuse Spiritual Mediocrity Hebrews 13

We've reached the end of our sermon series and the end of the book of Hebrews. If you recall where we've been you know that Hebrews was written to a community of Jewish Christians who were being tempted to turn away from the gospel of Jesus Christ and revert back to the old covenant because of the pressures of persecution. The author has given them extensive arguments for why that would be a really bad idea and shown them the fullness of Christ's sacrifice that alone can provide forgiveness of sins. It's not by observing the rituals and sacrifices of the old covenant that one is made perfect before God, it's by faith in Jesus Christ, which unites us with him and what he did in his life, death, and resurrection. He is our perfect high priest, interceding for us right now in the heavenly places and those who endure by faith in him will receive their eternal inheritance. This is the good news of the gospel and the message of Hebrews. And those who embrace it will be saved.

But oftentimes, what happens to people who embrace this good news, is that they lose some of their motivation for living a godly life. If salvation is a gift received by faith and they don't have to earn it through obedience or by doing works of the law, and if their sins don't condemn them anymore, then for some people it becomes just a little bit easier to give in to temptation and sin. It's easier to let things slide when the temptation is too strong and appealing. "I don't have to be perfect. God will forgive me." It's easy to become lazy in the pursuit of holiness and settle for spiritual mediocrity. If I'm honest, there are times in my life when that's the case, and you may have felt the same way.

It's kind of like those new AT&T commercials that remind us "Just ok is not ok." (Play Video) *(My favorite one is the doctor who comes in to meet the patient before surgery. The nurse has just told them that the surgeon is just "ok," which was alarming to them, and as he enters the room, he's bragging about how he "just got reinstated... well, not officially...")*

We don't want to settle for mediocrity when it comes to surgery, but when it comes to our pursuit of holiness, that's what people often do.

As the author of Hebrews begins to bring this letter to a close, we will see that he calls his readers to do exactly the opposite – he calls them to live upright and holy

lives in a number of different areas. He sets the bar high for what their standard of living should be. He doesn't want them to just drift along in spiritual mediocrity, giving a half-hearted effort to the pursuit of holiness. He wants them to go all out. And the question I want us think about this morning is "Why?" Why should we do that? If we're already saved by grace, why can't we just kind of coast through this life when it comes to our obedience and holiness? Why should we give it our best effort? It's not going to save us, so why go all out? We're going to look for the answer in Hebrews 13:1-16. He gives some final remarks and greetings after that to close the letter, but we're going to end up at Vs. 16 today.

Read Hebrews 13:1-7.

Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶ So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" 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.

At first this seems like a random list of instructions that don't have any rhyme or reason. But what I think he's doing is calling his readers to live upright and godly lives overall by touching on many important areas. He's setting a high standard for how they ought to live.

- He begins with how they ought to treat each other – they are to continue to love one another with a brotherly love.
- He mentions how they should treat "strangers" – people who come to them needing temporary food or shelter. They didn't have fast food restaurants and discount hotels back then. People who were traveling depended on the hospitality of others. So they were to show them hospitality by giving them food and shelter for the night.
- He writes about how they should treat fellow Christians who were in prison and suffering for their faith – they were to remember them and help them.
- He writes about marriage and how they were to treat it with the highest honor. They are to protect the purity of the marriage bed – steer clear of adultery and anything else that violates God's design for marriage.

- He reminds them how to treat money and material possessions – they should not pursue them as the center of their lives but be content with what they have and trust in the Lord’s provision.
- And finally, he calls them to imitate their leaders who first taught them the gospel of Jesus Christ. I don’t know exactly who they were, but we know it was some of the early disciples – people who were sold out for Jesus in life and in death. They were all in. These were the kind of people to imitate.

So these instructions touch on some big areas of their lives and he calls them to a high standard of holiness. Don’t be lazy in how you treat people; don’t be careless when it comes to marriage; don’t be distracted by the pursuit of money. Instead, imitate your leaders who brought you the word of God. Refuse spiritual mediocrity. Live exemplary lives as Christians. Pursue holiness. Be above reproach. This is how Christians who realize they’ve been saved by grace are supposed to live. But again, I ask “Why?” What’s the motivation? He gets to that in the next section.

Read Hebrews 13:8-16.

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.

So he begins by telling them that “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*” He says that because they were being influenced by some “diverse and strange teachings,” probably coming from the priests in the tabernacle who were trying to lure them back into following the rituals of the old covenant. They were being told that they had to partake in those rituals and eat the meat of the sacrifices. So the author says, “Don’t be led away by those teachings.” Jesus hasn’t changed. The gospel hasn’t changed and never will. We receive spiritual nourishment and strength in our hearts by grace and not by eating the meat of the sacrifices which have never benefitted anyone devoted to them.

He reminds them in verse 11 that the meat of the sacrifices came from the bodies of animals that had to be taken outside the camp to be disposed of and burned – there was no sanctifying power in eating that meat – it was just meat. Those sacrifices were supposed to point people to their need for the sacrifice of Jesus. He too was brought outside the gate, but that’s where he suffered and died on the cross to sanctify us (purify us from sin) through his own blood. So the priests who served in the temple and depended on the old covenant rituals and sacrifices had no place at the altar of those who put their faith in Christ – they had no right to partake in the sacrifice of Christ. In other words, you can’t mix faith in Jesus Christ with the rituals of the old covenant – they don’t mix. You have to choose one or the other.

So instead of listening to the teachings in their society and giving in to the pressure to conform, he tells them to choose Christ – to go to him outside the camp – to go against the pressure of their society and bear the reproach he endured, willing to suffer persecution knowing this world will fade away and we have an eternal city and inheritance waiting for us. They were to choose Jesus and be willing to be rejected by culture. And in doing that, he gives them two final instructions.

Read Hebrews 13:15-16.

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.

In choosing Jesus, he tells them that through him they were to continually offer up praises to God, specifically praises that would acknowledge the name of Jesus. They were to not shy away from speaking the name of Jesus in their worship. But in doing so, they were also to make sure that they did not neglect to do good and to share what they had – they were to live the kind of lives he called them to live in the first 7 verses – exemplary lives that would be pleasing to God. So, choose Jesus, even though you will be rejected by your culture for doing so, and in choosing him, be vocal about your faith and live exemplary lives.

Why does it matter that we continue to pursue holiness in our lives even though we know that we’ve been saved by grace? Why is it not ok to settle for spiritual mediocrity? What’s the motivation? The motivation is that when you live in a culture that rejects Jesus and you choose to stand firm for him and proclaim his

name, the society around you is going to look for ways to discredit you for what you believe. They are going to look for things in your life that will ruin the reputation of Christ. They are going to try to run a smear campaign against Christianity and they are going to look at our lives to try to find their ammunition. If you are living in sin – if you are self-centered, mean, unloving, uncaring, adulterous, mean to your spouse or kids, consumed by the love and pursuit of money, consumed by your material possessions – then the witness of your life is ruining the reputation of the one who died for you.

So in closing this letter, the author of Hebrews calls them, and now us, to live lives that bring honor to the name of Jesus. We live in a society that's becoming increasingly anti-Christian. The values and norms of our culture are putting pressure on us to conform and turn away from Jesus. And we have been called to choose Jesus instead of our culture; to stand firm for him and proclaim his name even though that will mean we will be rejected. But in doing that, we need to be zealous in our pursuit of holiness so that our lives will bring honor to the name of Jesus and not shame. We need to live godly lives so that when people from the outside look in and try to destroy our reputation they won't have any ground to stand on. Instead, they will have to say, "These are actually good people – moral, upright citizens."

Peter urged his readers to do the same thing in 1 Peter 2: 11-12: *"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."*

Are you involved in anything right now that the world could point to that would bring dishonor to Jesus? I think God's message for you today is that you need to turn that around immediately. How are you treating other people? How are you treating marriage? How are you treating money and material possessions. Don't let your life provide anything that can be used to ruin the reputation of Jesus. Instead let your life be a beacon of light that will point people to the hope of the gospel.