
God Working in Us what is Pleasing to Him

Hebrews 13:7-25¹

Endings sometimes are hard things. Sometimes the endings are hard because they have been bad. There is a sense of loss and regret and unfinishedness. Sometimes endings are hard because things have been good. The separation occurring at the end of a good, enjoyed job or ministry. I have over the years come to the end of many wonderful soccer seasons. The ending of a date when Esther and I were courting. There is desire to linger and make it all last one more minute.

Coming to this last sermon in Hebrews is like that. This is a good ending. And I want to linger and make it last. But the last sermon on this grand sermon must sound like the text it is preaching. It must come with a sense of finality and finish. Our author does this for them and for us by highlighting how God is at work in us to bring about what is pleasing to Him.

Precepts: The Conduct that Pleases God (v.7-19)

Our author is closing the book with a series of commands that are to direct our conduct in God-pleasing ways. Generally, these are commands addressed to the community of believers, the church. They show us how we ought to live in our lives together.

Honor those who have led you (v.7-8)

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.

The church to whom this was written had had an exemplary leadership in the past. For whatever reason, these men were no longer with them. It is possible they were martyred, we do not know for sure. They were marked out as their teaching elders who had spoken God's Word to them and had lived godly lives whose faith sustained through to the end. That sort of faith is to be carefully evaluated, esteemed and emulated.

Elders are commended when they live out their teaching in lives whose faith causes them to be faithful. Do we as leaders live and

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conduct ourselves in such a way that people see faith through us so clearly that they can imitate the faith?

We are to make an effort to learn about the faith and faithful lives of great men and women in Christian history. To this end, we can read biographies and glean from them God-pleasing conduct flowing from faith. Do you know anything about Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Spurgeon, Mueller, Owen or Rutherford? What about the missionaries like the Stammers, Hudson Taylor or Jim Elliot? Who of us have not been spiritually stimulated by Elliot's, "He is not so foolish to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Even though leaders come and go within God's providence, Jesus never changes. Though we can find much to admire and imitate in the lives of godly men and women, we must build our lives in the foundation of Jesus Christ. Leadership must learn and grow and cultivate grace and experience sin overcoming victory – that is to say, human leadership changes. But Jesus never does.

Don't be carried away by error (v.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.

These people had sat under good teaching from godly men. Now, in the hardships of the hour, they risked being captured by a variety of doctrines alien to the New Testament. The Old Testament had very detailed regulations for diet. The New Testament has done away with them. It seems, because of verse 10, that the false doctrine taught that the special spiritual power was given in the eating of the Mosaic sacrifices. Godly Jews who brought sacrifices were sometimes given a portion of the cooked sacrifice to eat. The argument was being made that the eating of those sacrifices was required because of the spiritual sustenance given. So there was some sort of teaching about ceremonial foods giving special power to Christians for spiritual service.

The author responds with a key doctrine in Christian living. Christians are strengthened inwardly for transformation and service by grace. Special diets may strengthen the body and have some profit like exercise does. But the sustaining strength for Christians is grace. Grace is not imparted through some sort of ceremonial meal.

I want to say this with all the conviction of having chased them for a number of years. There is no “secret” or “key” to Christian living. No one can give you external steps or keys or secrets that guarantee sanctification. Spiritual power is learning and living God’s Word by grace in the midst of the mess. It is a matter of the cross. It is being saved by the cross. It is taking up our cross. It is embracing the cross. The cross is our New Covenant privilege. The altar we have today is the cross of Christ.

Leave apostate religions and churches (v.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.

Where do I get that from this paragraph? Remember that this book is written to Jews, some of whom had professed Christ and others who were attending, but had not yet fully committed by leaving Judaism. Since the death and resurrection of Christ, Old Testament Judaism is an apostate religion. It rejected Christ and the cross and was rejected and condemned by God.

The author says that Jesus suffered a full and final sacrificial death outside the city physically and outside the camp figuratively. Those who were involved in Judaism, had to leave it (the city and the camp) and go to Jesus outside. They must be willing to bear the disgrace because they are like Abraham, looking for the heavenly city.

It is no different today. Professing believers are to be exhorted to leave false religions and apostate churches if they are to be received as true believers. Any religion, no matter how close its vocabulary may be to Biblical Christianity, that teaches a works salvation is apostate. This includes any church which teaches baptismal regeneration, including the Catholic Church.

Notice the command in this text in verse 13, “Let us go to Him outside the camp bearing the disgrace (of the cross) He bore.” If professing believers were to leave Judaism at the time of the writing of this text, then professing believers must leave apostate churches today. Why? Because it was in Judaism that they were being taught the alien doctrine of the spiritual empowerment of ceremonial food. And today, it

is apostate churches that teach various kinds of doctrines alien to the Bible.

Offer God-pleasing sacrifices to Him (v.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.

Since we are not to worship in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, what are the sacrifices of the New Covenant?

Sacrifice of praise

Praise to God is commanded, it is to be continual, it is to be cultivated like fruit and is confessing the Name of Jesus. Our worship of God is to be marked by cultivating continual praise that confess the character and supremacy of Jesus. God is pleased with people whose lives are marked by a passion for Jesus that bears fruit in praise to Jesus.

Sacrifice of sharing

Doing good and sharing with others must not be forgotten in the midst of our Godward focus. God is pleased with people who sacrificially love one another with good deeds for one another and with sharing their lives and resources with one another.

Great love for God in passionate praise to Him should lead to sacrificial love for others in selfless sharing with them.

Be willing to follow your spiritual leaders (v.17-19)

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.

¹⁸ Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. ¹⁹ I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.

There are three commands that are given as part of following spiritual leadership. Two were given in reference to their own elders and one in reference to the author. Some of what I have to say to you here may appear to be self-serving. So I am going to carefully exposit what the

Scriptures are saying and then reflect on how I have applied these to my own life.

Obey your leaders

The word is usually translated by the words *be persuaded* or *be confident*. The verb here is an imperative or a command in the passive voice. So we are being commanded “to be persuaded” by our spiritual leaders. (There is no passive use of the word *confidence*.) Look at how the author of Hebrews uses the word in 11:8 and in 5:9. It is significant that every translation I have in English and in German and Spanish translates this word by “obey.” So I am persuaded to obey my spiritual leaders.

Submit to their authority

This phrase is one word in the Greek. Most translations make it “submit” and then add “to them” for clarity. The word means “to put oneself under another.” In the battlefield, it meant to withdraw or surrender. It is an imperative or command in the active voice. So I put myself under the authority of my spiritual leaders.

Both of these words are colored by the idea of conflict and disagreement. It seems to me that what they are being commanded to do is to be persuaded by their spiritual leaders and to surrender or withdraw from conflict with them. Now we know that sinning elders are to be dealt with (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Elders are to be open to the counsel and opinions of those in the congregation. And the congregation is to not stubbornly resist the spiritual leaders.

What is to motivate us to obey and submit?

The elders are responsible to give an account to God for you. We are like soldiers on the night watch. We carefully stay alert because we will give a report to the commander.

This makes shepherding a joy and not a burden. There is no joy like seeing children progressing growing up in humble submission. And there is no grief like a rebellious, stubborn son who resists and will not bend his will.

This makes the ministry profitable to you. Sometimes the usefulness of ministry fails because of failure in the elder or elders. Sometimes the ministry is without profit because of the people.

Pray for us (them) (v.18-19)

Here is the final command. The author exhorts it in relation to himself and those ministering or shepherding with him. Because of that, he can assure them that his own conscience and conduct are pleasing to God. Since specificness is important in prayer, he requests that he be restored to them soon.

Following our spiritual leaders in submissive obedience is much easier when we are praying for them. Maybe we see needs and shortcomings in their lives. When we do, we are faced with a choice. We can criticize or gossip or we can pray, talk to them and give God time to change them. In other words, we treat them as we expect or want to be treated.

Our author makes his request for himself a part of the flow of this text. After all, if the church there is not pleasing to God in their following of their spiritual leaders, would they really pray that this absent leader be able to come to them, along with Timothy (v.23)?

Maybe whether we pray for our spiritual leaders is really the gut test of following them.

Prayer: The Ability to Please God (v.20-21)

Now let us be frank. Most of these exhortations are not easy for us. Some will be because of our bent. But for most of us, somewhere one or more of these commands really challenges us in our thinking and wants. Some find imitating the faith of faithful people easy, others are too individualistic. Some find standing strong against apostasy and error easy, others struggle with wanting to be gentle and loving. Some find praise in worship easy, other struggle with emotions. Some find caring and sharing their lives natural and easy, others are more private and withdrawn. Some find obeying and submitting for the joy of their leaders easy, while others struggle with stiff wills.

For none of us is our weakness and struggle an excuse. We do not get an absence slip for being tardy in pleasing God. So how can we be pleasing to God in every aspect of His perfect will?

This prayer by our author has within it what is needed for godly obedience.

²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his

will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Our Divine Resources (v.20)

The Author brings all these resources to bear on our need. He brings forward the character of God, the power of the resurrection and the shepherding aspects of the lordship of Christ.

The God of peace

This is an oft used title by Paul in his epistles. We must remember that we are called to please by obeying the God of peace. When we do, we begin to experience the peace of God.

The God who raised Jesus

The measure of the power of God is not in creation or in restoration. It is in the resurrection. There the power of God available to accomplish the purposes of God was most fully revealed.

The Lord Jesus, our great shepherd

Jesus is our good and chief and great shepherd. He is our good and chief and great pastor. He is the one whom we all obey and submit to together. And He is the one whose care and chastening of us is perfect.

In other words, when the conduct that pleases God seems out of reach at certain points, here is God – the God of peace whose resurrection power is available to those whom His Son is pastoring.

His Enabling Request (v.21a)

To see the heart of this request, it is helpful to underline the main subject and verb. “May God equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ.”

What is requested (*may God equip you*)

The word “equip” means to build up, shape or prepare fully. So he is praying and asking that God would do all that is necessary in every area so that we are able to do His will. He is asking this of the God whose character and power and care have just been described.

Do you think that God answers this prayer? If so, when and for whom did you pray it last?

How it is done (*working in us*)

How is this full equipping or preparing brought about? By God working in us what pleases Him through Jesus Christ. Earlier he said that it was good that we were inwardly strengthened by grace. Well, here it is in other words. We work because God is working in us.

Now we do not passively wait until we “feel” that we are ready. No, we bend our wills and extend our efforts to begin obeying. And we do so because we believe God’s promise that He is working in us with all these divine resources to fully prepare us for the next choice of obedience. This is faith, loved ones. This is believing God in an obeying way.

Its Exalting Result (v.21b)

When we, believing God is working in us to shape us in every way for to please Him in doing His will, when we choose in the midst of the mess to obey, then Jesus Christ is glorified. Jesus Christ is magnified in the eyes all who see believing obedience. Magnifying Jesus is the goal of believing obedience.

Reflect and Respond

Some of these are both hard and encouraging words. I close with the Author’s closing appeal.

Loved ones, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have only touched the surface of how saints are matured when Jesus, our sufficient Savior and our supreme Sovereign, is magnified.

For the glory of Christ and the gladness of all peoples.