

Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-25

Message: Purposeful, Obedient Living

November 25, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

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There could be about 10 sermons in just this one chapter from Hebrews. Ten different topics about life and living in relationship with God and with one another.

This is one of those chapters where it is tempting to say, “this is what you should do.” And we leave church thinking, “Wow, the pastor really told us today. Now I better go *do* those things.” Along with that thought comes the idea that we have to live in a certain way to gain/earn/keep God’s favour. We have to live right and be right to stay right with God. It’s about obedience, isn’t it?

Um, nope. It’s not about what you do that earns your relationship with God. It’s by grace, remember? Not by works.

But this chapter seems full of instructions for how to live. Those instructions are not about obedience to earn God’s favour. They direct us to a life of thanksgiving for grace received.

This whole “short” letter is about having a clear focus on Jesus, who he is and all that he has done to give us access to the Father and eternal hope. Knowing Jesus makes a difference in how we live in a changing world. While so much around us is changing, the principles for thankful, purposeful, obedient living remain the same.

The changes are easy to identify. Technology and social media dominates our lives and relationships and communication. Cannabis is legalized. LGBTQ+ lifestyle is being normalized. The traditional definition of family as Mom, Dad and a few kids is a minority. Church attendance has declined. Basic truths of faith are not understood. Faith groups are disparaged and sidelined. I could go on and on. What is this world coming to? Are these signs of the end of times? How can we get back to the “good old days”?

But then, do we really want to go back to the good old days? Were those days really better? Or were they any different? Were there not broken relationships and unbelief and oppression, even in the “good old days”? Maybe it was not as blatant or as obvious or public, but each era has had its own issues to deal with.

The first audience who heard the words of this book of Hebrews were experiencing various difficulties. Changes were happening all around them. They were facing opposition for their faith. They looked longingly at the good old days and the old ways of law and sacrifices.

But is their experience, or our own experience, really unique?

Andrew Maclaren, a pastor from the late 1800's, writes in a sermon on this text (150 years ago), "...this Jesus dominates the ages, and is as fresh today, in spite of all that men say, as he was eighteen centuries ago. They tell us he is losing his power; they tell us that mists of oblivion are wrapping him round, as he moves slowly to the doom which besets him in common with all the great names of the world....Christ is not done with yet, nor has the world done with him, nor is he less available for the necessities of this generation, with its perplexities and difficulties, that he was in the past."

In the first century people were suggesting that Jesus was meaningless and had no influence and there was opposition against Jesus' followers. In the 1800's that same voice was being heard. Around us we hear similar sounds. Jesus is useless. Faith in him is senseless. It makes no difference for life.

But verse 8 continues to ring true: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

It's not that faith in Jesus means nothing changes. Nor does faith in Jesus mean being opposed to any kind of change. It's that faith in Jesus continues to apply to our changing times.

Faith in Jesus encourages us to keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. The relationships we have with one another are important. We are not isolated islands. Love is more than an occasional text message or snapchat picture. It is sitting down, with the phone off, looking each other in the eyes and listening to each other. It is care and compassion and understanding. It is unconditional love, as Christ loved us.

Faith in Jesus is expressed in kindness extended to strangers. That includes welcoming refugees whom we have never met. That includes holding the door open for someone walking into the same store. That includes sharing wealth through the Salvation Army with people in need, whom we might never see. It means greeting someone in church when you don't know (or don't remember) their name.

Faith in Jesus includes caring for those in prison, who are serving time for wrongs they have done. There is not an attitude of judgment or arrogance, looking down on those who have done wrong. Remember those in prison by being part of chapel services on Sunday afternoon in the Brockville jail. Or consider marking Bible studies that inmates are filling out and sending in; while marking them, you can write encouraging comments to the inmate.

Faith in Jesus impacts our marriage relationships and the commitments we make to one

another. Promises are kept, anniversaries are celebrated, faithfulness is a priority. Pornography is rejected as an equal threat to relationships as much as a physical affair with another person.

Faith in Jesus touches, or grabs hold of, our wallets on the weekend of Black Friday, Cyber Monday and Giving Tuesday and all through the Christmas shopping season and all year long. The love of money was a temptation in the first century just as it is to us today. Be content, trusting in God who is always with us.

Faith in Jesus impacts respect for leaders. It's not so much a blind obedience of whatever the leader says, but "imitating their faith." See how leaders live out their faith and experience God's blessings as an encouragement for your own trust in Jesus.

There's the first six mini-sermons from this passage.

Again, it's not just about needing to be perfectly obedient and right in our behaviour in order to be right with God. The next verses direct us to see that "our hearts are strengthened by grace," not ceremony. It's not about the right ritual of a proper order of service. Nor an exact time of reading our Bible every day. Nor a legalistic 10% tithe to the offering.

Sometimes we can get so hung up on making sure that we are doing this whole faith thing correctly. But what we forget is that living out one's faith has changed over time and in different cultures. The way faith was practiced by the early church is different than in 2018. The way faith is practiced in Nigeria is different from Brockville. The way people worshiped and lived their faith in the 1700's in the Netherlands or in the New England Colonies or in the 1950's in Brockville is different than today. It's not that Jesus has changed, or the story of salvation has changed. What changes is the way of expressing that faith.

Listen again to these words spoken from a pulpit in the late 1800's: "I do not give much for any doctrine which is not made alive by personal experiences of the indwelling love of God. I do not care much what a person believes, or what they deny, or how they may occupy themselves intellectually with the philosophical and doctrinal aspect of Christian revelation. The question is, how much of it has filtered from their brain into their heart, and has become part of themselves, and verified by their own experience?"

It's not about legalism, or the good old days. It's about following Jesus, becoming like Jesus. It's about staying true to faith in Jesus Christ, in spite of opposition or rejection or ridicule.

It's about all of life being lived to honour Jesus. "Continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with

others.”

This sacrifice of praise is not just about worship on Sunday and putting money in the offering. Yes, that’s part of it. But it’s more than Sunday. It’s offering your whole self as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (see Romans 12:1). All of life is worship. All of life is giving, as if to the Lord. “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me,” says Jesus (see Matthew 25:40).

This brings us back to the beginning of this chapter: love each other as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to entertain strangers. Remember those in prison. Honour your marriage vows. Be content and free from the love of money. Imitate the faith of your leaders.

This is everyday, ordinary living out of our faith in all the things that we do. Being like Jesus to each other, to strangers, to those we agree with and those we disagree with.

We started this series in chapter 1 with the reminder that all the fragments of God’s revelation come together in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the fulfilment of revelation. We continued in this series to see that Jesus is greater than the angels and greater than sacrifices, greater than the priests, including Melchizedek. He is the focus of our faith and our hope for this life and the life to come.

The practical result is that the focus of our life is not on obeying the rules, nor on maintaining proper traditions, nor on getting everything right. The focus is not on ourselves. The focus of our life is a heart that trusts in Jesus and lives that trust, to be like Jesus, in every thing we do, including our rules and traditions. The blessing is that God, in Jesus, with “equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him.”

How do I finish this sermon? I could make suggestions for how to live this out in practical ways, and that could be understood as a “to do” list given by the minister, so “I better do that.” I could ask questions about how you are going to live this out and that could be understood as more things to do to be a good follower of Jesus.

So, instead of some minister telling you what to do, let’s hear the words from Hebrews 13:15-16. Reflect and study these words and consider how the Spirit is leading you to apply them to your life in purposeful, obedient living:

“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

Amen.