

Marks of a Healthy Community of Faith

Hebrews 13

Introduction: 1) The book of Hebrews is about the supremacy and superiority of Jesus Christ. Thirteen times the author will use the word “better” or “superior” to emphasize that Jesus is superior to anyone or anything that came before Him or will come after Him. As our merciful and faithful High Priest He “made propitiation for our sins” (2:17), and “is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). The author of Hebrews is crystal clear: by His work of atonement on earth He obtained our salvation and by His work of intercession in heaven He maintains our salvation.

2) And, as the author and finisher, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, this King-Priest who fulfills the Old Testament expectations of Psalm 110 enables us and inspires us to run the race of the Christian life, a race of endurance and perseverance for which He is our prime example (12:1-2).

3) If Hebrews 11 and 12 provide examples and encouragements of faith, Hebrews 13 is filled with evidences and the ethics of faith, evidences and ethics that are distinguishing marks of a healthy community of faith.

4) A number of students of the Bible believe the book of Hebrews was initially delivered as a sermon or series of sermons. As the practical application and natural response to the “so great salvation” provided for us in Jesus (2:3), chapter 13 is, as George Guthrie says, “a strategically crafted final movement to this powerful sermon...a series of robust exhortations...for living out the Christian faith in the details of daily responsibilities” (Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC, 434).

5) In this chapter of 25 verses, the author peppers his text with 12 imperatives providing words of command as to how we should rightly respond to the perfect cross work of Christ. Here we see marks of a healthy community of faith, what Alistair Begg calls a “Faithful Family,” that

should characterize any church, any place and at any time. I will focus on nine for our consideration.

Transition: Two observations before expositing the text: one contextual and one theological. Contextually, chapter 13 might have begun best at 12:28. Theologically, chapter 13 is written for the born again. Chapter 13 does not tell us how to live to get saved, but it addresses how the saved will live in response to their Savior Jesus whom 12:24 describes as the “Mediator of the New Covenant.”

I. It Will Consistently Love Each Other. 13:1

- 1) Here is the foundational ethic for the entire chapter and for a healthy body of believers: “love.” “Brotherly love” is the Greek word “philadelphia.” This is a family kind of affection we enjoy because we have the same Father. “Continue” is a present imperative. This love is volitional, active and personal and it is something God commands us to do. There is nothing shallow or sentimental about this love. The New Testament is filled with commands to love one another (Matt 22:39; John 13:34; Rom 13:8; 1 Cor. 13; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 John 3:11; 4:7, 11), and with very good reason.
- 2) Jesus said so simply and so clearly in John 13:35, “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Christians loving Christians has an evangelistic/missionary element and effect! If lost, there is great damage to both our community and our witness.
- 3) Calvin saw the ever present danger of the church losing this vital and essential Christian badge and said, “Nothing flows away so easily as love; when everyone

thinks of himself more than he ought, he will allow to others less than he ought...”
(Calvin, *Hebrews*, 339).

- 4) In one of his many classic works, *Charity and Its Fruits*, Jonathan Edwards raises the question, “What is it that makes the Church like heaven?” His answer is a single word: “love.”
- 5) I believe if the Church will indeed act more like heaven on earth, we will discover this to be one of the most effective means used by God to get more on earth into heaven. It bears witness to a lost world of the difference Jesus makes! A healthy community of faith will love one another. It will not just talk about it. It will do it.

II. It Will Care For Those In Need. 13:2-3

- 1) The author of Hebrews fires 2 more imperatives in our direction in verses 2-3: “do not forget” (v.2) and “remember” (v.3). Both charge us to help those in need, though two different groups are in view: strangers (v.2) and prisoners (v.3).
- 2) As an outgrowth of brotherly or family love, a healthy community of faith will be proactive in what we can call “a household of hospitality” and “ministries of mercy.” Unlike the evil Diotrephes of III John 9-10, we will be ready to care for those traveling thru our area for the cause of the gospel. Further, in our context, our homes and our churches will be marked by hospitality, grace and openness as we allow the fragrance of the gospel to be an attractive aroma to those needing our loving attention. The experience of Abraham in Genesis 18 where he entertained two angels and the Lord Himself is the biblical paradigm for this word of wisdom, as well as this word of warning. Unfortunately many today find welcoming homes of hospitality in bars, health clubs, Barnes & Noble and Starbucks. Too many churches function like

- exclusive social clubs that only want members who look and act like them. Biblical hospitality will know nothing of racial, social, economic or cultural barriers that eclipse the offense of the gospel.
- 3) Prison ministry also was a necessary and vital calling of the church in the first century. It should be an important facet of ministry in the 21st century as well. In Hebrews 10:34 it is noted that this believing community had previously ministered to those in prison. Here they are reminded to continue this practice “as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you are also in the body” (*ESV*), that is the real world of this present life.
 - 4) Guest may surprise us, but prisoners must be sought out. This “captive audience” needs our prayers but also our presence. Sin, either their own or others, has dealt harshly with them. They need to know someone cares. They need the message of hope in the good news of Jesus we have!
 - 5) This ministry of mercy will be messy. It will often be dirty. It will be filled with disappointments, but it will also be incredibly rewarding when the transforming power of the gospel does its work in individual lives. Jesus said in Matthew 25:35-40, “for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ‘When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ‘Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ “And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one

of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” Chuck Colson and “Prison Fellowship” has set the standard in this area. We, who love souls, would do well to hook up with such a ministry.

III. It Will Honor The Divine Institution Of Marriage And Family. 13:4

- 1) Here is where the counterculture of the gospel should shine brightly. Unfortunately our light has been quite dim and for some time. Weak homes will inevitably lead to weak churches. Tragically, this reality continues to unfold before our very eyes.
- 2) I follow here those who say we should probably understand the opening expression of verse 4 as another imperative: “Let marriage be held in honor.” Interestingly there is no verb in the Greek text. We must provide it in English.
- 3) “The marriage bed undefiled” is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The Bible is clear and consistent in its message: Sex is a good gift from a great God to be fully and wonderfully enjoyed with the covenant of marriage. In contrast premarital sex, extra-marital sex and unnatural sex will receive the just judgment of God. Fornicators and adulterers God most certainly will judge. John MacArthur rightly says, “Within marriage, sex is beautiful, fulfilling, creative. Outside marriage, it is ugly, destructive and damning.” (*Hebrews*, 431).
- 4) Marriage has been assaulted and sex has been abused and the church has a pretty pathetic track record in both areas in recent years. Divorce is accepted as inevitable, premarital sex is not a big deal, affairs happen, children are viewed as a burden, wives and mothers need their careers, and husbands and fathers are buffoons who are to be pitied and not respected. You say you are talking about the culture. No, I am talking about too many churches.

- 5) So let's get practical. Premarital counseling, intensive premarital counseling, must become a must for those you would marry. A regular diet of marriage and family instruction that is biblical, theological and practical must be on the regular menu for your people.
- 6) Challenge: cultivate a mindset and ministries that will foster:
- Masculine sons who love Jesus and dream of doing something great for Him, something they see in their fathers!
 - Feminine daughters who love Jesus and dream of pouring their lives into children who will soar for the glory of God.
 - Marriage as a sacred, divine covenant meant for life.
 - Sex as a precious and dangerous gift from God that must be handled wisely and with care.
- ❖ Practical Word of warning in the context of fornication and adultery: “wrong person + wrong place + wrong time = the wrong thing happening!” Never forget the disastrous example of King David!

IV. It Will Have An Unshakable Faith In God's Providence.

13:5-6

- 1) Sins of immorality and covetousness often accompany another. Prohibitions against them are side by side in the 7th and 8th of the 10 Commandments. They find themselves often grouped together in the New Testament in text like 1 Corinthians 5:10-11; Ephesians 4:19 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6. Why is this the case? Because both the sexually immoral and the lover of money seek satisfaction and gratification in denial of God's goodness and provision. Both are rooted in unbelief in God's providence and give way to idolatry and the worship of a false god.

- 2) Verse 5 begins with a single word we can translate “no lover of money.” Do not let the love of money be your way of life, being satisfied or content with present things or what you have. The apostle Paul spoke to this same issue in his instruction to pastors when in 1 Timothy 6:6-8 he wrote; “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.”
- 3) However, the really fantastic and glorious grounding of this instruction in Hebrews 13:5-6 is found in what follows in the form of 2 magnificent promises which draw on Old Testament text like Gen 28:15, Josh 1:5, Psalm 27:1 and Psalm 118:6: 1) “I will never leave you nor forsake you” and 2) The Lord is my helper; “I will not fear. What can man do to me?” In both phrases our author uses a double negative.
- 4) His argument: “You can pursue money which will never satisfy and may even abandon you, or you can run to the Lord who is your helper who will no not leave you nor no not forsake you.” One you can never count on and the other you can always be certain of! How hard of a decision is this?!

Illustration: It is these promises that have sustained the most important person in my life, my wife Charlotte. Born into the home of alcoholic parents who divorced and abandoned her, trusting Christ as Savior at the tender age of 11 and having a heavenly Father in her life whose providential presence and protection has accompanied her without fail has given her a faith in a God who truly makes no mistakes.

Money comes and goes. Parents may come and go. Friends may come and go and even betray you. The Lord, however, is your comforter (v.5) and your helper

(v.6). “What can man do to me?” Nothing, that does not come thru the hands of a loving and caring heavenly Father who is always there by your side.

5) The one who has Jesus and nothing has everything. On the other hand, the one who has everything and not Jesus has nothing. Give me Jesus! He is with you and He will help you. You can trust in His providence.

V. It Will Respect Those Who Teach The Word And Shepard Their Souls. 13:7, 17, 24

1) Three times in this final chapter the author addresses the subject of those who lead the church.

- Remember those who rule over you (v. 7).
- Obey and be submissive to those who rule over you (v. 17).
- Greet all those who rule over you (v. 24).

2) Why are we to treat our leaders in this fashion? Six reasons are given.

- They spoke the word to us (v. 7).
- They provided an example to us to follow (v. 7).
- They watch out for our spiritual well being (v. 17).
- They will give an accounting to God (v. 17).
- They should be able to serve with joy and not grief (v. 17).
- It will be unprofitable for us if we don't! (v. 17).

3) Blind loyalty is not in view here, but a biblically and theologically informed allegiance is. As a leader and watcher of souls:

- Preach the Word, all of it! Mark Dever has well said, “The first mark of a healthy church is expository preaching. It is not only the first mark; it is far

and away the most important of them all, because if you get this one right, all the others should follow” (*9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, 39).

- Be an example worthy of emulation (nothing unbiblical, unethical, immoral, illegal). Be someone men and boys look up to and women and girls admire because you evidence a genuine walk with God.
- Shepherd the flock of God under your care. Lead them to respect you and to trust you.

VI. It Will Not Be Moved Away From Christ-Centered Doctrine. 13:8-9

1) At the center of the Christian life is Christ!

At the center of good theology is Christ! Why? Because He “is the same yesterday, today and forever!” The wonderful New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce provides a beautiful comment on this very important Christological affirmation: “Yesterday Jesus “offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death” (Ch. 5:7); *today* He represents His people in the presence of God, a high priest who is able to sympathize with them in their weakness, because He was “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Ch. 4:15); *forever* He lives, this same Jesus, “to make intercession for them” (Ch. 7:25). His help, His grace, His power, His guidance are permanently at His people’s disposal; why then should they lose heart? Others serve their generation by the will of God and pass on; “but he, because he abideth for ever, hath his priesthood unchangeable: (Ch. 7:24). He never needs to be replaced, and nothing can be added to His perfect work.” (*Hebrews*, NICNT, 395-96).

- 2) The changeless and incomparable Jesus of v. 8 is contrasted with changing doctrine (“do not be carried away”) described as various and strange doctrine. Such doctrines: 1) misunderstands grace (v.9), 2) fails to embrace the sufferings of Christ as a sufficient sacrifice for sin (v. 10-12), 3) draws back from the reproach we will experience in our identification with Christ (v. 13) and 4) loses an eternal perspective that brings a healthy perspective about what life is truly all about (v. 14).
- 3) Calvin beautifully captures the basic thrust of these verses when he says, “The only way by which we can persevere in the right faith is to hold to the foundation, and not in the smallest degree to depart from it; for he who holds not to Christ knows nothing but mere vanity, though he may comprehend heaven and earth; for in Christ are included all the treasures of celestial wisdom. This then is a remarkable passage, from which we learn that there is no other way of being truly wise than by fixing all our thoughts on Christ alone.

The import then of this passage is that in order that the truth of God may remain firm in us, we must acquiesce in Christ alone. We hence conclude that all who are ignorant of Christ are exposed to all the delusions of Satan; for apart from him there is no stability of faith, but innumerable tossing’s here and there...But let this warning of the Holy Spirit be fixed in our hearts, that we shall never be beyond the reach of danger except we cleave to Christ.

Now the doctrines which lead us away from Christ, he says, are *divers* or various, because there is no other simple and unmixed truth but the knowledge of Christ; and he calls them also *strange* or foreign, because whatever is apart from Christ is not regarded by God as his own; and we are hereby also reminded how we are to proceed,

if we would make a due proficiency in the Scripture, for he who takes not a straight course to Christ, goes after strange doctrines. The Apostle farther intimates that the Church of God will always have to contend with strange doctrines, and that there is no other means of guarding against them but by being fortified with the pure knowledge of Christ.” (345-46).

VII. It Will Be Characterized By The Spiritual Sacrifices of Praise, Thanksgiving and Service. 13:10-16

- 1) In his study of Hebrews, Leon Morris notes, “The word “sin” occurs twenty-five times in this epistle, more often than in any other New Testament book except Romans (forty-eight times). The frequency with which the writer refers to it shows that he sees sin as the great barrier between God and man. He writes in the glad certainty that this barrier has been demolished. Christ has opened up the way to God by taking our sin out of the way. There are many ways in which he sees Christ to have done this. Christ made propitiation for our sins (2:17), offered a sacrifice for sins (10:12), did away with sin (9:26), bore sin (9:28). Because of what He has done there is no longer a sacrifice for sin (10:18). Christ’s death is a ransom to set people free from sins (even those committed in Old Testament days, 9:15). By contrast, the older way could not deal with sin (10:1-2, 4, 6, 11). Clearly the writer sees the salvation Christ brought about as many-sided. Look at sin how you will, the Son has dealt with it.” (*Hebrews*, Tyndale, 20).
- 2) Verses 10-13 address the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. His cross is our altar providing the food of grace, forgiveness, cleansing, hope and thanksgiving. He fulfilled the Day of Atonement (v.11) sanctifying us by His blood when He suffered outside the city gates of Jerusalem (v. 12-13). Indeed as Hebrews 10:12-14 boldly

proclaims, “But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting til His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.”

- 3) Verses 13-16 address our appropriate response to the great sacrifice of Christ on our behalf.

Verse 13 says we will bear His shame as we pursue Him.

Verse 14 says we will have an eternal, “world to come,” perspective (cf. Col. 3:1-4).

Verse 15 says we will offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

Verse 16 says we will offer the sacrifice of a shared life.

- 4) Jesus made the sacrifice of propitiation.

We make the sacrifice of praise.

- 5) However, the praise with our lips cannot help but find its way to a life of praise, thanksgiving, good works and a shared life that pleases our Lord. If you were to ask, what kind of good words does the author have in mind, I would say look specifically at verses 1-7, but do not hesitate to survey all of Hebrews 13. John Piper gets to the heart of the issue when he says, “The point is that people who get their strength and wisdom from the altar of the cross, from Jesus Christ, are people who live for others. They get up in the morning and think about how they can do the most good for other people today. This is the sacrifice that they offer to the Lord day after day.” (“The Sacrifice of a Shared Life”, 10-24-89).

VIII. It Will Cultivate A Ministry Of Prayer For Its Leaders. 13:18-19

- 1) Suddenly, and almost matter of factly, the author of Hebrews ask for prayer. It is a strong request, an urgent request. He uses the present imperative.
- 2) Further, it is an interesting request because it is given in the context of his confidence of 1) a good conscience, 2) a desire to live honorably in all things and 3) a hope to be restored quickly to the congregation before whom He believes he has the first (a good conscience). He asks the Hebrews to pray that God would give the latter two.
- 3) Paul calls us to “pray without ceasing” in 1 Thess. 5:17. Prayer should, indeed, be an ever present reality for each and every believer. For what should we pray? Many things and the Bible is filled with instructions to guide us.
- 4) But here a particular prayer is cited that I confess that I covet. It is a prayer for those called by God to lead His church, a prayer that will assist us in doing what we do with a good conscience and a praiseworthy or honorable life. I need that. You need that. Every minister of the gospel needs that.
- 5) Kent Hughes, who for many years served as senior pastor of the College Church in Wheaton and editor/author of “Preaching the Word” puts it well, “If we desire power in our lives and in our churches, we must pray. Likewise, if we desire our or others’ preaching to be more than exegesis and rhetoric, we must pray.

How different the modern church would be if the majority of its people prayed for its pastors and lay leadership. There would be supernatural suspensions of business-as-usual worship. There would be times of inexplicable visitations from the Holy Spirit. More laypeople would come to grips with the deeper issues of life. The leadership vacuum would evaporate. There would be more conversions.”

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the gifted Baptist preacher of London, admonished his congregation as he concluded his sermon delivered May 27, 1855: “My people! Shall I ever lose your prayers? Will ye ever cease your supplications?...Will ye then ever cease to pray? I fear ye have not uttered so many prayers this morning as ye should have done; I fear there has not been so much earnest devotion as might have been poured forth. For my own part, I have not felt the wondrous power I sometimes experience.” (Hughes, 239). Never draw back from asking your people to go before the throne of grace and intercede on your behalf. You need it. I need it.

**IX. It Will Look To Jesus As Its Great Shephard To Perfect Them In Good Works.
13:20-25**

- 1) Hebrews 13 concludes with a memorable doxology (vs. 20-21) and personal words of encouragement and greeting (vs. 22-25).
- 2) The doxology is stirring both because of its beauty and its theology. It draws together a number of themes that have been addressed throughout the book of Hebrews such as the blood of Jesus, the new/eternal covenant, the preeminence of the Lord Jesus and the importance of persevering to the end in good works.
- 3) There are also several new themes introduced. Only here in Hebrews is our God identified as the “God of peace,” a popular Pauline concept. Only here is the resurrection of Jesus addressed. Only here is our Savior called “the great Shepherd of sheep.”
- 4) It is in response to this wealth of Christological truth that we seek to be equipped in every good work to do His will (our responsibility), rejoicing that it is God who is working in us that which is pleasing in His sight (His responsibility), all through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

5) In thought and deed; in head, heart and hands, the life of the child of God should revolve around the one John's gospel calls the "Good Shepherd" (John 10:11), Peter the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet 5:4) and Hebrews the "Great Shepherd" (Heb 13:20). It should revolve around Jesus. Tell me what you think and believe about Jesus and I will pinpoint 90-95% of the rest of your theology. Tell me what you think and believe about Jesus and I will have a pretty accurate barometer of your moral life. There is an interconnectedness that is inescapable. I realized this one day when talking to a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, a former student of Rudolf Bultmann. He asked me, "Why do you believe what you do about the Bible?" My response was simple: Jesus believed it! If He is my Lord, how could I believe otherwise?

Conclusion: 1) The wonderful English divine W.H. Griffith Thomas wrote that 5 simple words could sum up the letter to the Hebrews: enter, experience, enjoy, exult and extol (p. 183).

Attach these words to our Great High Priest and Shepherd of the sheep, and you have the necessary foundation for building a healthy community of faith, a community made complete, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, in every good work to do His will.

2) We are who we are because Jesus is who He is. We do what we do because Jesus has done what He has done. If Christ is superior in us, Hebrews 13 will be lived out through us. Here is the key to bearing the marks of a healthy community of faith, put on display for the glory of our great God.