

“An Anchor for the Soul: Be Imitators”

Hebrews 6:9-12

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • January 3, 2016

I think you would probably agree with me that we live in a leisure-oriented society. The so-called “good life” is to work in a career just long enough to have enough money to retire and spend the rest of your days in some form of recreation. Work is merely what you have to do to get to retirement as soon as possible. I saw a poster not long ago with this saying on it: “Hard work often pays off in the future. Laziness always pays off right now.”

We’ve seen this before. I have a camera that was made in the Communist Soviet Union. It’s big and heavy. I learned that the quality of these cameras varied widely but there was a trick to knowing which ones were more likely to be better quality. Some of the cameras have English lettering and some have Russian lettering. It turns out that under the Communist system the factory was required to produce so many tons of cameras per month. Quality was not their highest concern. But they discovered that if they were accurate enough they could sell them in Europe to get much-needed currency. So they would test the cameras and the good ones had English lettering put on them and sold in Europe and the ones that didn’t meet the quality standards had Russian lettering put on and were sold to the Russian people. Either way it didn’t matter if the factory worker did a good job or not.

Sometimes it does matter. During World War II, there was a young Navy Signalman 3rd Class named Elgin Staples who was stationed aboard the USS Astoria. During a battle in August of 1942, Staples was swept overboard when one of the gun turrets exploded. He was wounded in both legs and was in danger of going into shock but he was kept afloat by a narrow lifebelt he was wearing. After about four hours in the water he was rescued and returned to the Astoria. Three hours later the Astoria sank and Staples found himself back in the water, still wearing the same lifebelt. On board the transport ship he began to closely examine

this lifebelt that had saved him twice. He discovered that it had been made by Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio and that it had a number printed on it.

Within a few weeks Staples was sent home to Ohio on leave and he asked his mother, who worked for Firestone, about the number. She explained that each employee was assigned a unique number because the company insisted on personal responsibility for the war effort. Staples, who remembered every detail of that life belt, quoted the number to her. It turns out that it was his mother’s personal code and was stamped on everything she was responsible for inspecting. Her diligence in making sure that every lifebelt she inspected, met the standards, every day, meant that her son could come home again. And if that kind of diligence and perseverance is important in your job, imagine how much more important it is in eternal matters.

The pastor who wrote Hebrews to that little, scared house church in Rome says, “And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” Sometimes you will hear atheists say something like, “Christianity is just a crutch for the weak. It’s a way for people who are weak to cope because life is hard.” Let me tell you, following Jesus is hard. It’s atheism that’s a crutch for the weak. Think about that. Deciding to give your life to Christ and follow Him means taking up your cross, sacrificing personal desires and replacing them with Christ’s desires. We live every day being pulled from two directions. We are pulled by heaven and by the world and it’s often hard work to know which is which.

A couple of weeks ago Brian talked about the warnings Hebrews gives us and some of it was hard to hear. It hits close to home. Hebrews 5:11 says, “About this we have much to say, and

it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” Then it goes on, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.” The harshest warning, though, is against hearing the good news of forgiveness in Jesus, “tasting the heavenly gift,” and then turning our backs.

But the writer of Hebrews knows his congregation and loves his congregation. He calls them “beloved.” And he sees hope. He writes, “We feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation.” In other words, he sees evidence of salvation, evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in them. Salvation is always the work of God. Ephesians 2 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” There is nothing we can do to earn God’s love and forgiveness. But if the Holy Spirit is working in you it’s going to show. And the writer of Hebrews sees some of those signs in the church.

Verse 10 says, “For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.” One of the ways that Jesus shows up in your life is in your desire to minister to others. A church, any church, can only exist because there is a group of people who have been so changed by Christ, so loved by Him, that they want to learn how to love that way. They want to learn everything they can about him; they want to worship him as creator and savior and lord; they want to take care of each other, meeting one another’s needs; and they want others to experience the same thing. Now here’s the really hard part – they do it for the rest of their lives.

There’s no retirement from following Jesus. That’s what the warnings were all about in the previous section. So verses 11 and 12 tell us, “We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” Now you may be asking, “who should I imitate?” I think a good place to start would be people in the Bible like David and Daniel and Paul and Jesus. In fact, in a couple of chapters we will find Hebrews giving us a list of people we should imitate. But you can also learn about people who have lived with that full assurance of hope to the end. People like St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Billy Graham.

The bottom line is this: The Christian life is about love. It’s about loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and it’s about loving others as yourself. Think about when you first fell in love. You weren’t sluggish or slothful then. Your love moved you to action. It’s the same with loving God and loving people. The evidence should not be something you have to force, it should come naturally. But if you have been in love long enough, you also know that it’s hard work to make it last. It’s the same here. Verse 10 even ties love and work together. Sacrificial, self-giving love is hard work. But it’s worth it.

Like the writer of Hebrews, my hope and prayer for you is that you will have that kind of love and enthusiasm for God and for each other. I pray that you will work to show that kind of love until the end, not being slothful but with passion and excitement that leads you to worship and serve!

Amen