

“An Anchor for the Soul: Yesterday, Today, Forever”

Hebrews 13:7-19

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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I want you to think for a moment about your journey with Christ so far. What I really want you to do is think back to when you first started following Jesus. Who was it that introduced you to Christ? If you are a relatively new Christian you probably know who led you to Christ and also when and where it happened. Or if you are like me and probably many others here, you can't point to a particular date or place because you grew up in a strong Christian family and so your knowledge and trust in Jesus was formed over many years. By the way, both ways are biblical.

What's extremely rare is for Jesus to appear to you directly and convert you. Every one of us has learned the faith from someone else. So who were the people through the years who influenced you in your faith? For me, first on the list would be my parents. I grew up active in the church and with an active faith at home. They read the Bible regularly and they read the Bible to me. My grandparents were also a strong influence. But there were others. Faithful Sunday School teachers like Mrs. McKerley, Mrs. Haefner, and Mrs. McDougal. There were a number of pastors through the years who have taught and formed me and some of them still do. Who were the teachers and mentors who taught and formed you?

Today's passage begins, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God." This word "leaders" does not mean people in authority or leadership positions. The word literally means "those who led you" or "those who went before." In other words, we are to call to mind those who taught us about Christ – "those who spoke the word of God" to us. Now this is not just for nostalgia. We are to think about these saints for a reason. Verse 7 goes on, "Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." How did they live their lives? How was it evident that God was at work in their lives? How can you imitate their faith?

Well I'll tell you one way you can imitate their faith – pass it on. The reason you remember them teaching you the faith is because they taught you the faith. They didn't keep it to themselves. Whether it was a pastor, a youth leader, a Sunday School teacher, a Young Life leader, or a parent or grandparent, they spent significant time and effort to introduce you to Jesus and teach you what it means to follow him. They studied the Bible so they could teach it to you. One of the key ways you can imitate their faith is to do the same thing. Invest your time and effort into knowing the Bible and then passing it on to others. Everyone here should be willing to invest in other people in this way.

Verse 8 then tells us why it's helpful to imitate the faith of our mentors. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Because Christ is the same, the faith we pass on is the same. God's truth doesn't change. That means we can trust the pattern of the Christian life taught in the Bible. That also means that the things we talked about the past two weeks – what God expects from us in our relationships – does not change, even if society's ideas change. Especially if society's ideas change. Jesus still says to each one of us, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). But it also means that the promises of God are the same. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Today, the greatest threat to the Christian faith is not from persecution, although that is certainly a threat that is increasing. But the truth is that persecution always strengthens the church instead of weakening it. No, the biggest threat is from within and Hebrews 13 warns us to be on guard against it. Verse 9 says, "Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings." There's something about human nature that we like "new and improved." Nevermind that if something is improved it's therefore not new. But we fall for it. We want the new and

improved soap or stereo or whatever. And we tend to bring those feelings to our faith. We think that newer is better.

Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever. So many people have been led astray by trying to find something “new.” Probably the best example of this is the “Jesus Seminar” from the 1980s and 90s. Basically, a bunch of scholars got together and voted on the historical accuracy of the various statements of Jesus in the Bible. This may be hard to believe, but they eventually decided that the “real” Jesus believed and taught the very same things *they* believed and taught. The parts of the Bible they didn’t like they simply voted out.

The writer of Hebrews warns us against that kind of thinking. “Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace.” He goes on to point us to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross by mentioning again the Temple sacrifices.

In the Old Testament period, people were commanded to bring sacrifices to the Temple. Sometimes they were animals, or grain, or wine. Once offered, most of these sacrifices were left for the priests to eat. That’s how they were fed. But one of the annual sacrifices, offered on the Day of Atonement, was not to be eaten. The blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies and the rest of the animal was taken outside the city and burned. The writer of Hebrews links the Day of Atonement sacrifice, the sacrifice for sins, with Jesus’ death on the cross, which took place outside the city gates.

Here’s the important point: in the Old Testament sacrifices, the people were commanded to bring the first and best of whatever they produced. A sacrifice always meant giving up something valuable to God. We don’t sacrifice animals any more because Jesus served that purpose forever. Verse 12 says, “Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.” While we don’t sacrifice animals, we *are* still required to bring God our first and best. Verse 15 tells us, “Through [Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.”

Another way to translate that would be a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

So since a sacrifice involves giving to God something that’s valuable to us, what are we sacrificing? Well, what’s being described here is *worship*. In order to worship, you have to give up being the most important person in your life. You can’t worship yourself *and* God. Everything else in the Christian life flows from the sacrifice of putting Jesus in the center of your life, offering your entire self to Him. How do you know when you’ve done that? As we saw the last couple of weeks, it shows in your relationships with other people, in the way you spend your time, and the way you handle money. Verse 16 reinforces that point: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” In other words, trust God with your money and serve other people.

There’s one last area that we are called to sacrifice and that’s our reputation, our standing in society. Listen closely to verse 13: “Therefore let us go to him [Jesus] outside the camp and *bear the reproach he endured.*” Truly following Jesus means being willing to give up worldly status. It means being willing to be ridiculed and rejected for your faith. It means speaking about Christ. That’s the “fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” We do this because we’re not really citizens of this world. Whatever fame or fortune or standing we think we have is really foreign if we belong to Christ. One day every thing here will be gone. One day you will stand before God with nothing but the treasures you stored up in heaven.

So what should you do? Verse 17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them.” This is not really a great translation. The meaning is closer to this: “listen to those who led you to Christ. Be persuaded by them and stop resisting their teaching. Make them proud.” The way you do that is to give your life fully to Christ. That means everything – your desires, your time, your money, your reputation, your sexuality, your relationships, *everything*. Jesus died to redeem it all. Then pass that faith on to someone else.