Notes for Preparing to Teach Hebrews – Part X (Hebrews 12 and 13)

It’s very unfortunate that I ran short of voice and energy at the conclusion of our last session because Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12 are inseparably related. It is as a result of what has been described in Hebrews 11, this Hall of Fame of the Faithful, that the preacher/author of Hebrews plans to challenge his hearers/readers in Hebrews 12.

In the early 17th century, one of the most famous Puritan preachers in Cambridge, England, William Perkins, wrote a book called, A Cloud of Faithful Witnesses [It is available on the web at:

I like what he had to say when he writes about this “cloud of witnesses” that: “they are *a cloud of witnesses*; that is, a huge multitude of witnesses. And they are so called, first, because by their own blood they confirmed the faith which they professed. Secondly, because they did all confirm the doctrine of true religion whereof they were witnesses, partly by speeches, and partly by actions in life and conversation. And so is every member of Christ a witness; as the Lord often calls the believing Israelites, *His witnesses*. *Question*: How came this to pass, that these believers should be God’s witnesses? *Answer*: Surely because they testified the truth and excellency of God’s holy religion, both in word and action, in life and conversation.”

In short, there are so many examples of faithfulness, of those who have paid the price to serve and testify toward the Lord Jesus, that our vision is overwhelmed. When I was little, I used to imagine this as all of the dead saints sitting on the clouds and watching us struggle to finish the individual races of our own lives. But if we pay attention to the wording, we realize that the “cloud” is made up of the witnesses themselves. It isn’t a cloud full of witnesses; it is a cloud made of witnesses. As long ago as the 19th century, Franz Delitzsch agreed: “As in the semicircle of the theatre spectators sit on crowded benches tier above tier, to watch the conflict, so have we gathered round about us a νέφος μαρτύριων, -- a close-pressed, cloud-like multitude of spectators is seated and watching us from either side.” [Delitzsch, Franz, *Delitzsch’s Commentary on the Hebrews: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870), p. 297.]

I personally believe that it is the examples of these martyrs that are supposed to challenge us and that they are figuratively, symbolically rooting us on. I have to admit that part of that is thinking that if those who have already gone to be with the Lord can see what we’re up to, it would reduce their joy of heaven. So, I don’t really like that imagery of the departed saints looking down on those of us who haven’t finished our life’s races. Of course, most people like that imagery. For example, “Like a crowd of runners who have already finished the race, these faithful ones cheer on those who are running it now.” [Campbell, Constantine R. and Jonathan T. Pennington*, Reading the New Testament as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), p. 320.]

I am encouraged, however, to realize that Karen H. Jobes of Wheaton College agrees with me: “’Cloud’ is a literal translation of a classical idiom in literary Greek that simply meant a large number of witnesses and so should not be taken as an image of people hovering around or above us in their heavenly existence. Scripture does not teach that those who are now with the Lord in glory can see back into the affairs of people on earth. It is not because your late grandmother in heaven might see you sinning that you should run with perseverance in faith. No, the great cloud of witnesses refers to the testimony by example that those Old Testament believers mentioned in Hebrews 11 have left for us.” [Jobes, Karen H. *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011), p. 142.]

It is, at least, clear that the author/preacher of Hebrews wanted Chapter 11 to inspire the exhortations to be found in Chapter 12. As a result, there are three things that believers are supposed to do in order to follow the inspiration and example of those who have gone before us. First, we are to “take off” the baggage, impediments, whatever is weighing us down. It might surprise some of you that, as we see on the image on the left of Slide 4, the athletes in Graeco-Roman sporting events actually ran naked. There are a couple of reasons for that, but the first one has to do with being weighed down.

Now, since the verse addresses sin in specific in the next phrase, I believe this baggage, impedimenta, or extra weight is something that may not specifically be sin, but can hold us back. Just like there is no problem with wearing street clothes but you wouldn’t want to wear them in a very competitive basketball game. A lot of athletes in the present day like to wear ankle weights to strengthen their ankles and leg muscles. Yet, can you imagine someone like this jogger on the slide actually choosing to wear the weights in a race? It would be silly and self-defeating.

If I were teaching this verse, I would ask students to list ways we hold ourselves back in the Christian life, even if they aren’t something we would specifically label as sin. Earlier, I referred to the Puritan preacher, William Perkins, and his early 17th century message on this passage. Here’s how he described five (5) types of baggage that Christians may unnecessarily carry.

1. love of temporal life
2. care for earthly things
3. riches and temporal wealth
4. worldly honor and entitlements
5. worldly delights and pleasures.

The second matter we’re supposed to take care of in Hebrews 12:1 is to take off the sin that restricts, constricts, or entangles us. Remember, that even though the everyday tunic of the ancient world was essentially a knee-length or just above the knee “dress,” and the toga was a longer outer cloak and additional decorative scarf, even the tunic was likely to hold you back or even trip you if you were running full out. In battle, the Romans were known to belt the hem of the tunic higher, but in athletics, both the Greeks and the Romans got rid of the tunic altogether.

For believers, sin keeps us from experiencing the fullness the Holy Spirit has for us. Sin keeps us from developing our spiritual gifts as completely as God wants us to develop them. Sin keeps us from being able to see the obstacles in our path. It holds us back. So, how do we take it off? We confess it and put it behind us as soon as we recognize it.

The third thing we are to do is exert ourselves, hanging in there tightly, competing with discipline according to the challenge, conflict, course of competition set in front of us. The author’s exhortation is not to try to live the Christian life in sprints. The verb used is literally, remaining under or remaining under control. The word for contest, game, or competition in Greek, as used here is ἀγῶνα (pronounced “ah-GOH-nah,” the word from which we get “agony”). Guess what? The Christian experience isn’t supposed to be short or easy. It’s intended to be a competition where we are required to show some fortitude, some effort, and vision.

I’m sure you’ve noticed how distance runners will pace themselves for much of the race, just staying in striking distance so that they can go all out with their “kick” as they near the finish line. As believers, we don’t have to be in front all of the time as we run the race God has given us, we just need to be consistent enough that we can allow the Holy Spirit to propel to victories at appropriate times. God knows what we can do and God won’t let us be outclassed. The good news, though is that we aren’t uncoached regarding this race through our lives. We have a champion and perfect strategist to guide us in this race.

And that leads us to verse 2: “Focusing on the groundbreaker and record-setter [lit. “one making perfect”] of our faith, Jesus…” Here, I translate the Greek word which means “first to accomplish” as groundbreaker. On the slide, I paraphrase it as “pole position.” I used to translate it as architect or designer, but it’s much more than that. This isn’t the course designer. This isn’t the groundskeeper. This is Jesus, the first to complete the course, the first and only sinless human who voluntarily sacrificed His life for God’s purpose.

Last time I tried to explain this, I didn’t have a solid illustration. I pointed to the winner of the pole position in this year’s Indianapolis 500 who had looked like he was going to win going away, until his teammate accidentally hit him in the pits. But since then, I have a better illustration. Max Verstappen has been the world leader in Formula I racing for the last several years. In the Spanish Grand Prix last Sunday, he started in first position by virtue of having the fastest time in qualifying. Amazingly, he was the fastest even though his pit crew kept telling him to go faster, but he understood the car and the track conditions better than they did. He was the first, in this case the fastest, to qualify.

But then, he ran the fastest all through the race. Amazingly, since the race has been over, he admitted that the car can run even faster. He just did what was necessary to keep the race in hand. On the slide, you see him at the finish line, winning the race. Well, to exploit our analogy or illustration, Jesus wasn’t just the first to finish [or in our illustration, the fastest to qualify] but He was the completion, the perfection of the finish. Jesus’ life is our example of a perfect race. He is the pole position and the record-setting winner of the race.

And that’s the example we are to follow. Race drivers will often drive right behind another race car to reduce wind-resistance, to save fuel, and to figure out what they call the “racing line,” the best path or trajectory to get maximum performance around the course. So, the preacher of Hebrews uses the last part of verse 2 to remind us of what Jesus did and to compare it with what might be expected of his/her hearers/readers and, of course, you and me.

Frankly, I’m not an athlete. I enjoy playing but I don’t enjoy training. Even just working off a few calories on my elliptical machine is not fun for me; that’s why I’m either watching television or reading while I do so. The only joy for me is finishing the goal. But Hebrews 12 tells us that at the end of the race was the joy set before him while the Cross was the beginning of the race [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume V: The Fourth Gospel, The Letter to the Hebrews* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1932), p. 433.] To me, that’s mind-boggling in two ways: 1) that He saw joy in the midst of death, and 2) that Death is the start of what Jesus accomplished for us, not as most of us humans think, the end.

And there’s that same word for Jesus, exerting Himself, hanging in there tightly, throughout the experience of the cross, just like we are supposed to exert ourselves and hang in there tightly throughout our lives. It’s followed by Jesus looking down on the shame of cross. I translated this as downplaying the shame because the Greek verb is literally “to consider down, to think down.” It means that while the whole world considered crucifixion to be a disgrace, Jesus’s obedience to the Father offered a different value judgment. And naturally, it reminds us that our value judgments shouldn’t be the same as the world’s value judgments, either.

There is also an interesting verb tense used to describe Jesus sitting at the right hand of God’s throne. After “finishing the race,” as it were, Jesus doesn’t stand on the podium or stand in God’s Presence as a matter of honor, much as victorious athletes might do after the Games or in the Arena. Rather, the verb is Perfect (completed) Active (continuing) Indicative (fact). He HAS sat down and He CONTINUES to sit down in the place of honor and authority (the right hand).

In summary, verse 3 challenges the readers/hearers to reason, to consider, to understand using the Greek verb, ἀναλογίσασθε (pronounced “ah-nah-loh-GIH-sahs-theh”). Do you hear the word “analog” or “comparison” in there? In the Graeco-Roman world, most philosophy was conducted by analogy and, believe it or not, this is the only time this verb is used in the New Testament. It means to let the comparison between Christ’s actions (and by placement this close to Chapter 11, those of the Old Testament faithful), rattle around in your minds until it makes an impact. The tense is Aorist (something that has already happened that has a continuing impact), Middle (something that is supposed to affect the person performing the verbal action), Imperative (a command). So, the hearers/readers (as well as you and me) are commanded to reflect on what has happened for us, internally, and keep on considering it. “Martyrdom did not quench the faith of the witnesses of old, nor did the Cross defeat Jesus; how much more ought we to fulfill with patient endurance our vocation, which has not called for the shedding of blood (v. 4).” [Purdy, Alexander C., “Introduction and Exegesis of Hebrews” in *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume 11: Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 739-740.]

This, of course, leads us into verse 4 which underscores that the hearers/readers haven’t yet faced the torture and martyrdom faced by the Old Testament witnesses and Jesus Himself. HOWEVER, just because they HAVEN’T faced that shedding of blood, doesn’t mean that they won’t. Indeed, the book’s emphasis on holding true to one’s confession, remaining faithful as in hanging in there, and exerting oneself to keep running the race by hanging on tightly, suggests that ridicule, torture, and even death may be on its way.

To the hearers/readers who might be tempted to say, “That’s not fair!” the preacher quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 in verses 5 and 6. In those verses, the wise old man says to the younger (son or student):

*11) My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof,
12) for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.* [RSV]

And, although the preacher is not quoting Revelation 3:19, it is pretty easy to hear the echo of God’s message to the church at Laodicea in the quotation from Proverbs:

*19) Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent.* [RSV]

The quotation from Proverbs sets up the preacher’s comparison between earthly fathers and God as heavenly father in verses 7-10. My favorite summary of these verses is found in a book by a former president of McCormack Theological Seminary in Chicago. “Our writer reminds his readers of the earthly discipline of fathers, who disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, i.e., as it seemed best to them. But their discipline often erred both in method and purpose, yet we respected them. Why should we not accept the discipline of the Father of spirits? When, therefore, hardships come that torment us with anguish, let us look up through our tears to the heart of a loving Father, trusting his good purpose, and we shall be strong.” [Cotton, J. Harry, “Exposition of Hebrews” in *The Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Volume 11: Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), p. 742.]

Earthly parents discipline from their limited experience and viewpoint, but God sees the whole picture. The last part of verse 10 tells us that it is for our good. That probably isn’t too comforting when we’re actually experiencing the pain that we sometimes have to go through. It won’t always be clear why we’re going through what we’re going through. Yet, the preacher just wants to assure us that God has our betterment in mind, just as we are told in Romans 8. Verse 11 tells us that we earn the fruit of peace when we’ve trained.

Bear with me as I share a crude illustration from the Dark Ages when I was in high school. We had a very aggressive football coach and, one year, he was my Physical Education instructor. This guy was a firm believer in the old adage, “No pain, no gain!” In many ways, he treated his P.E. class like he treated the football team. We either ran the obstacle course, ¾ of a mile (3x around the oval track), or climbed “Victory Hill” every day. Now, since our football stadium was, like the stadiums of ancient times built on a hillside, it might surprise you that “Victory Hill” was merely the bleachers set on the side of a hill.

Climbing “Victory Hill” meant to run up the bleachers to the top, walk down, run up the bleachers to the top, walk down, run up the bleachers to the top, over and over for about 10 times. He called it “Victory Hill” to the football team because it built the stamina in their leg muscles. It wasn’t too bad for the first couple of trips up those hillside bleachers, but from halfway to the end, those legs would ache and burn. We hated him. But by the end of the year, guess what? We could climb “Victory Hill” and still have lots of extra energy for basketball, tennis, and baseball.

So, verse 12 is challenging the readers/hearers by going right back to the athletic illustration. They are supposed to straighten up rather than bending over groaning, lift up their knees and lengthen their strides rather than dragging their feet, and push with that runner’s kick to the finish line. And though it isn’t a direct quotation, listen to how close to Isaiah 35:3 it sounds.

*3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.* [RSV]

It doesn’t mention the firm footing the hearers/readers are to be seeking in verse 13, but the verse I just quoted from Isaiah continues to say in verse 4 that God will come to save those who keep on enduring, just as Hebrews 12:11 made it clear that the pain is only for a season, but God has a permanent solution as grace to us. Verse 13 does seem to quote the Septuagint/LXX/Greek translation of Proverbs 4:26, though.

*26 Take heed to the path of your feet, then all your ways will be sure.* [RSV] Of course, in Proverbs 4, the emphasis is upon avoiding evil rather than receiving the grace God has promised at our respective finish lines.

Remember all the emphasis I’ve made about how the writer of Hebrews likes to repeat key words and concepts? Can you find the idea that is repeated in verses 11 and 14 of Hebrews 12? Or even more examples where the opposite of an idea is found? Here’s what I have.

1. **Peaceful (v. 11) and peace (v. 14)**
2. **With the opposite in verse 15 (trouble)**
3. **Work for peace for everyone (v. 14)**
4. **Many becoming defiled from bitterness (v. 15)**
5. **Holiness to prepare for God’s presence (v. 14)**
6. **Defiled (being unclean/unworthy) (v. 15)**

And all of this rolls into the question of Esau. Verse 16 describes him as immoral or irreligious. The rationale is his devaluing of his birthright. It wasn’t just this one incident that describes Esau as irreligious, though. True, he didn’t care anything about the birthright and its faith heritage (probably, even priestly function), so it appears that the following statement by F. F. Bruce should be considered. “…even in his most disreputable moments, Jacob showed an appreciation of the heritage promised by God to his family and a determination not to miss that heritage; …so little did Esau value the birthright with which that heritage was bound up that in a moment of hunger he solid it ‘for a mess of pottage.’” [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 367.]

Remember that this isn’t the only way he devalued his heritage. He married women who didn’t fit with the faith heritage. As with the apostasy described in Hebrews 4:1, Esau’s problem is a lifestyle, not an isolated incident of “falling down.” Rather it is a turning away from God’s will and purpose to follow his personal preferences. So, this reminder of Esau’s ongoing failure would have reminded the hearers/readers of Hebrews of the earlier warnings.

Some people are confused about Esau’s inability to repent, despite his feelings of remorse. Norman Geisler is quick to point out: “…tears are not a sure sign that a person has genuinely repented. One can have tears of regret and remorse that fall short of true repentance or change of mind (for example, Judas in Matt. 27:31).” [Geisler, Norman L., A Popular Survey of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), p. 260.] Geisler, however, insists that these verses are dealing strictly with “earthly” inheritance as opposed to “spiritual” inheritance. In one sense, he is correct, but in the context immediate after the heroes of faithfulness in Chapter 11 and Christ’s faithfulness earlier in this chapter, I think we perform a disservice to ignore the spiritual inheritance and the danger of devaluing God’s promises by defiantly going our own way.

But the author/preacher of Hebrews wants his/her readers/hearers to know that we have a definite advantage over those in the old covenant. We don’t have to be threatened by God’s Presence because we have Jesus as the Mediator. To remind us, our preacher uses Hebrews 12:18-21 to describe the fear and danger involved with approaching Mount Sinai when God was speaking to Moses/Israel. Teaching in English, I would normally set up a matching exercise to encourage students to search the Old Testament scriptures behind what the preacher/author is saying.

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| **Phenomena in Hebrews 12:18-21** |  | **Old Testament Background** |
| **1. \_\_\_\_\_ even beasts can't touch (20)** | **A.** | **Exodus 19:16 ("a very loud trumpet blast")** |
| **2. \_\_\_\_\_ a tempest or storm (18)** | **B.** | **Deuteronomy 4:11 ("wrapped in darkness, …")** |
| **3. \_\_\_\_\_ trumpet sounds long blast (19)** | **C.** | **Exodus 20:21 ("people stood afar off, while Moses…"** |
| **4. \_\_\_\_\_ a blazing fire (18)** | **D.** | **Deuteronomy 9:19 ("I was afraid…"), perhaps** |
| **5. \_\_\_\_\_ darkness, gloom (18)** | **E.** | **Exodus 19:13 ("whether human or …")** |
| **6. \_\_\_\_\_ can't hear voice again (19)** | **F.** | **Deuteronomy 5:25-26 ("…if we hear…we shall die")** |
| **7. \_\_\_\_\_ could not endure (20)** | **G.** | **Exodus 20:18 ("mountain smoking"), Dt. 4:11** |
| **8. \_\_\_\_\_ even Moses afraid (21)** | **H.** | **Exodus 19:16 ("thunders and lightning")** |

Answers: 1. E, 2. H, 3. A, 4. G, 5. G, 6. F, 7. C, 8. D

But circumstances have significantly changed when we get to Hebrews 12:22. This is a sharp contrast to verse 18. Notice that we are no longer dealing with mere earthly locations because these venues and descriptions are essentially in apposition with each other. We’ve moved from Sinai to Zion, not the earthly, but the heavenly Jerusalem. “Hebrews 12:22-23 assures the readers that they have come to ‘Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to myriads of angels, to the festal gathering (πανηγύρει) and [or, even] the ekklesia of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.’ Local limits are forever foreign to this glorious picture.” [Stagg, Frank, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), p. 185.]

Remember the “Greater than…” or “Superior to…” framework to Hebrews that we discussed early on in our study? Well, this portion of the passage is a perfect example of how the writer underscores how much greater the new covenant is than the old covenant. A recent rhetorical study of the New Testament had this to observe: “The comparison frames Sinai as a mountain of marginal access under the threat of ‘death’ (12:20) but Zion as a mountain of full eschatological access to the ‘living God’ by the ‘spirits of the righteous made perfect’ (12:22-23).” [Parsons, Mikeal C. and Michael Wade Martin, *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament: The Influence of Elementary Greek Composition* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), p. 264.] And how is this greater or superior? It is because Jesus as Mediator is so much superior to Moses as mediator that He can transform lives. The author/preacher is urging God’s people not to settle for earthly limitations but to be open to the fullness of all God has available via the new life in Christ Jesus (12:24).

How is Jesus’ blood more eloquent than Abel’s? First, Abel was an involuntary victim while Jesus willingly sacrificed His life. Second, Abel’s blood cried out for vengeance while Jesus’ blood cried out for our salvation. “The blood of Jesus is not merely the blood of a righteous man whom God does not forget even when dead, but the blood of One who has passed through death into the immediate presence of God, and is now seated on a mediatorial and high-priestly throne.” [Delitzsch, Franz, *Delitzsch’s Commentary on the Hebrews: Volume II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870), p. 354.]

Of course, the author/preacher reminds the hearers/readers that it isn’t enough for a voice to speak, hearers need to listen to the voice. So, once again, the last part of the chapter becomes a warning. It was bad enough that the Israelites ignored the warnings of God, Moses, prophets during the period of the old covenant, but God’s people must not ignore the warnings this time. Why? Because the only way they can be secure and stable during this earth’s constant change and upheaval is to be tied to the kingdom which cannot be shaken.

But why, in verse 26, does God say that He is going to shake not only the earth, but the heavens one more time? Verse 27 tells us that it is so that what remains cannot be shaken anymore. We’re talking perfect stability as in God’s Kingdom full of worship, reverence, and awe in verse 28. My crude illustration here would be the old-fashioned flour sifter.

What is the purpose of sifting flour or a combination of dry ingredients? One reason is to aerate the mixture, make it lighter. Another reason is to attain a uniformity of size and remove the clumps that can ruin both texture and flavor. When God allows the natural and historical order of the world to be “sifted,” it opens up the opportunity to be influenced by the Holy Spirit’s intervention (“aeration”) and provides for a purifying consecration that allows for humans to have a relationship with Him (removing the clumps).

Of course, verse 29 goes away from the shaking/sifting idea to the purification by fire. Still, it’s the same idea of being prepared to be in God’s Presence. The hope, of course, is that “…if the church, in faith, and in obedience to the promise, remains unshakably steadfast, it is promised—in contrast to the wilderness generation of Israel—that it will enter into God’s eschatological [final] rest.” [**[Schnelle, Udo, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 645.]**

So, once again, we find ourselves experiencing the theme of remaining faithful, exerting ourselves to hang onto God’s unshakable Kingdom.

But what does that mean in practicality? Fortunately for us, Hebrews ends with a very, very practical chapter filled with specifics in Hebrews 13. The chapter is composed of two main sections and two closing sections. Verses 1-6 deal with behavior, ethics, if you will. Verses 7-19 deal with leadership and organization within the congregation which should, in turn, counteract some of those influences. Verses 20-21 probably served as the benediction when the sermon was originally preached and/or recorded. Verses 22-25 seem to be “housekeeping” information added to the book when it was actually sent to these believers who didn’t hear the original sermon.

The first admonition (v. 1) is to allow our family-like caring within the congregation keep on enduring. Some translations use “continue.” This verb is the root for the word to exert oneself by hanging in there that has been used throughout the book. Not only does it tell us how we are supposed to act toward each other, but it also serves as an implied warning that one of the ways we should recognize that we are cooling off in our relationship to the Lord if we are cooling off in our relationship to each other.

The second admonition (v. 2) is about not simply looking inward or feeling good about our brothers and sisters in the congregation, but it’s about looking outward. We aren’t simply to care for each other affectionately; we are also to meet the needs of those outside. Naturally, when we have no established relationship with people and no sense of control over their responses, we may find it difficult, we might even resent it. But the author/preacher unpacks a little surprise at the end. He or she says that we may end up meeting the needs of God’s messengers. We might ourselves be blessed or be provided what we need. Best of all, we need to see that when we show hospitality for those to whom we are not strictly accountable, we’re doing it for God and God’s kingdom—whether we see it that way or not.

Caravansaries and inns were notoriously unreliable in that era. I’ve pictured a traditional caravansary that was rebuilt into a fortress in the early Middle Ages. It follows the floor plan. You can see that they were moving shopping centers originally. On the other side of what are pillars, today, one would keep one’s animals and, on the sides, originally, were little areas with a beaded entrance. Though today, they are wooden.

If you were a wealthy merchant and could afford your own protection, you were likely okay. Individual travelers or a few stragglers like itinerant missionaries or evangelists had to watch out for themselves. These places doubled as houses of prostitution and dens of thieves. They weren’t very solid places for God’s representatives to stay. So, over and over in the New Testament, you see references to welcoming these representatives with “hospitality.”

Not only is hospitality a positive thing to do and good for your spiritual growth, but this idea of entertaining angels unaware is not simply the idea of aiding God’s work, but sometimes, you would grow as a result of interacting with God’s representatives. I remember hosting evangelists and missionaries when I was younger and, often, learning more from table-talk at home than in the formal meetings. I also remember those days leading college revival teams or drama team trips when we would stay with families in the churches. There was a lot of good sharing that went on in those times.

The third admonition (v. 3) is about not leaving those who had been oppressed or imprisoned off to take care of themselves. Remember, the government didn’t necessarily take care of the health and feeding of prisoners in that era. If you were forgotten, you were forgotten. And the preacher stirs the pot a little by urging the hearers/readers to treat the prisoners as though one were with them. That’s a subtle reminder that anyone in the Christian fellowship could be imprisoned at any time, as well as a reminder that the hearer/reader herself/himself should treat these oppressed brothers and sisters as they would want to be treated if they were arrested and imprisoned. We’re all in this together.

The fourth admonition (v. 4) is to put a high value on marriage and keep the sex act pure. The Greek word used here is the one from which we get the technical term “coitus.” Although I suppose it is always human nature to have sexual desires, why do you suppose the readers/hearers of Hebrews needed to hear this? Ralph P. Martin suggests that it is regards to false teaching akin to Gnosticism [Martin, Ralph P., *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students: Revised Edition: Volume 2: The Acts, The Letters, The Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 354-355.]. Some gnostics taught that since we are spiritual beings, what we do with the body doesn’t matter.

We see hints of this in 1 Timothy 4:3 where the gnostics apparently taught an unnecessary celibacy or that marriage just didn’t matter. To the contrary, Ephesians 5 indicates that marriage and the sanctity of even sexual intercourse is so important that the best analogy is our Lord and the church—a high standard, indeed.

As for the difference between immoral and adulterers? The former seems to be one who defiles the sanctity of another (whether married or not) and the latter seems to be one who defiles the sanctity of his/her own marriage. Either way, there is abuse going on which is contrary to God’s perfect plan for human wholeness.

The fifth admonition (v. 5) doesn’t tell us to take a vow of poverty. It does, however, challenge us not to be caught up in the love of money. Naturally, the love of money is a form of idolatry. It implies that we are depending on our saving and our efforts rather than depending on God. So, the admonition is followed up with a promise from Deuteronomy 31:6 (and elsewhere) that God will always be with us and not forsake us. To those who might have their earthly goods forfeit at any time or be thrown into prison at any time. This is a vivid promise. That’s also why it is emphasized with the quotation from Psalm 118:6 in verse 6. The psalmist stated in Psalm 118:5 that he called out to the LORD when he was in trouble and that the Lord answered him. That’s why, in verse 6, he knows God is on his side and that human oppressors cannot succeed.

The next section deals with leadership. Verse 7 reminds the readers/hearers of those leaders who have gone before and are no longer with them [Martin, p. 354.]. They are supposed to measure current leaders by the example of those previous leaders and (v. 8), the example of Jesus Christ Himself. The servant-leadership model hasn’t changed.

And, since Jesus Christ Himself is consistent, so should the doctrines taught by the leaders in vv. 9-10. The strange teachings give us a clue because they are tied to dietary measures. There are a couple of possibilities followed by a dismissal of the whole issue. First, a) diet might mean a reversion to keeping Jewish law, a hedging of the bet of faith, if you will. Second, b) many cults, particularly gnostic cults in Asia Minor (now Turkiye), distinguish themselves by dietary regimen as in those condemned in the Letter to the Colossians (probably distributed to Laodicea and Hieropolis, as well) in 2:20-23. Third, Paul says that they don’t count because c) God’s altar is greater than, superior to “the tent” (v. 10).

Leaders should also be mindful of Jesus’ self-sacrifice. Verse 11 reminds us that when sacrifices were killed for their purifying blood, the rest of their bodies were burned outside the camp—symbolically removing the animals on which the sins were placed from the holy congregation of God’s people to show there was no place for sin within God’s people. In a similar way, we have the New Testament account of Jesus being crucified with all of the sin of the world on Him, outside the walls of Jerusalem. Verse 13 makes it clear that He was led outside the walls as a symbol of rejection, but the implication is even more stunning, God’s people are to allow themselves to be rejected by the Jews (and others) just as Jesus was.

F. F. Bruce explains this well in his commentary: “They had been accustomed to think of the ‘camp’ and all that was inside it as sacred, while everything outside it was profane and unclean. Were they to leave its precincts and venture onto unhallowed ground? Yes, because in Jesus the old values had been reversed.” [Bruce, F. F., p. 403.]

Finally, both leaders and congregation need to be sure that they aren’t building earthly empires instead of God’s heavenly kingdom. “Christ is always out beyond any established city, beckoning to us, warning us not to be conformed to any earthly pattern.” [**Trentham, Charles A., “Hebrews” in Clifton J. Allen (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 12: Hebrews-Revelation, General Articles* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 96.] It’s praise, worship, and accomplishing the good that God wants us to accomplish that truly counts.**

**Verse 17 brings us back to the authority of the leaders. But notice that the leaders have a responsibility to watch over the well-being of the souls, the whole personalities, of their flock. There is no room for dictatorial pastors here. There is no room for arrogant pastors here. There is no room for greedy pastors here. They are “accountable” in the same sense that a Greek or Roman steward would be accountable for managing his patron’s wealth.**

**In the missive appendix, the leaders are to be greeted in verse 24, suggesting that they be kept in the loop.**