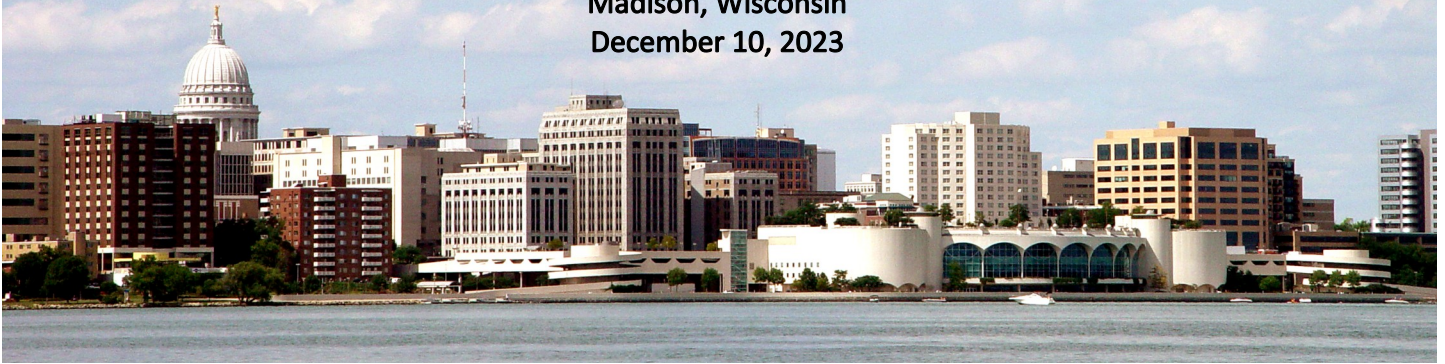


Spiritual Stability

Hebrews 13:7-14

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

Thank you to all of you who did such a great job bringing in the soup, and old cell phones, and inkjet and toner cartridges for Shults-Lewis Child and Family Services! I met the men from Shults-Lewis this past Wednesday afternoon, and they were extremely thankful. They rolled up, got out of the van and said, "Wow, that's a lot of soup!" So, thanks to all of you who worked so hard on this!

We are here this morning to 1.) Worship God, and to 2.) Preach the good news that God loves us! And the gospel (or the good news) is that God sent his only Son to die in our place, he was buried, and he was raised up the first day of the week. We obey this good news by believing the message, by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And we have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from Lord's church down in Mount Juliet, Tennessee. They posted a few days ago and say that, "We are so excited to celebrate with Jessica!" And then they quote from Romans 6, where Paul says that, "***We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.***" Good news from Tennessee this week!

And then we have an update from Seagoville, Texas. This got to me about 9 o'clock this past Thursday morning, and they say, "AWESOME NEWS! Last night, Michael Franklin was baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of his sins!! Please pray for our new brother! Praise God for the power of the gospel." And what I love about this is that the auditorium is empty – I'm not rejoicing that nobody was there, but I'm just noting that this man didn't wait for the next worship assembly. In Bible times, when someone learned the truth of God's word, they obeyed it immediately, at the same hour of the night or day, and that seems to be what we see here, and we are thankful for Michael's example this week.

We had many more that we could have shared this morning, but I'll restrain myself to this one more, coming to us from Andema Alex, a gospel preacher in Uganda, who says, "Praise the Almighty God dear brethren! I am glad our two sisters have been added to the body of Christ through immersion; therefore let's put these newborn babies in our prayers: that is, Lilian and Irene, to move in new Christian life." And then he says that the "Jeeja church of Christ greets you," and "May God guidance be upon you all in Jesus name." I hope you notice their baptistry!

This is one of the most unique setups I've seen. They have this water tower (I would call it) somehow collecting water, and then they have this blow-up swimming pool, and one of the men is blowing it up. I just thought you might appreciate this. But as always, we share these pictures of people being baptized this week to emphasize the good news, and if you would like to know more, please get in touch.

This morning, we continue in the very last chapter in our study of Hebrews! And in this last chapter we find ourselves in what we might describe as the "invitation" part of this message. As we have said from the beginning of our study, the book of Hebrews perhaps started out as a sermon. The whole book, in fact, takes about 45 minutes to read, and that is very doable in terms of a sermon. So here in December we're pretty much looking at the invitation, the conclusion, the part of the sermon where the author boils it down to what these people actually need to be doing. He's made the argument throughout the book that Jesus is better, and now we come to what this really means in very practical terms. And in a sense, this last chapter may seem a bit random. One author compared it to a commanding officer giving that last-minute briefing right before heading out on a mission in battle – he may give some reminders based on previous training, he may give an update to the plan based on recent intelligence, he may give some encouragement, and he may make some very personal statements. And to those soldiers hearing it at the time, those seemingly random comments may make perfect sense, but those who read the transcript hundreds of years later may need to dig a little bit for those comments to make sense. That's what we have going on here in Hebrews 13.

So far in this message, we've seen that Jesus is better, and now we come to what this really means. Hebrews 13 explains our response. And today, we come to some instruction concerning how to deal with spiritual chaos, as the author encourages us to avoid and perhaps overcome that potential chaos, 1.) by remembering those who taught us the word of God in earlier times, 2.) by warning us about the danger of getting carried away by strange teachings, and 3.) by encouraging us to carefully apply what we've learned from the word of God.

This morning, then, let's take a look at Hebrews 13:7-14,

⁷ Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹ Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. ¹² Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. ¹³ So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. ¹⁴ For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.

This morning, let's move through this passage, learning what God wants us to learn from it.

I. And we start with this statement that we are to **REMEMBER THOSE WHO LED YOU.**

If these people were to keep on keeping on, if they were to have any sense of spiritual stability, the author of Hebrews encourages them to *“remember those who led you,”* they are to *“remember those...who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.”* And I hope we notice, first of all, that this is past tense. We’ll get to the present down in verse 17, but in this passage the author is encouraging these people to *“remember,”* to remember the past, to think back to those who first preached the gospel, and he encourages these people to *“imitate their faith.”*

Secondly, not only is this past tense, but we are to remember these people because they *“spoke the word of God to you.”* We are remembering these people, not primarily because of their charming or charismatic personalities, but if we want stability in our faith, we remember these people for teaching us the word of God. I think of my parents, first of all, of course, but I also think back to others who first taught me the word of God. I remember Mary Roberts, a school bus driver, who taught my first grade Bible class down in Crystal Lake. I remember Randy Wille, a machinist, who taught our middle school Bible class, and since he was also the treasurer, we loved rolling up our dollars and tying them in tight little knots, and then asking him in class the next week whether he got our contributions. I remember Max Klein, who worked in the dairy industry and taught the high school class, and I remember learning the books of the Bible because he promised us pizza if we could do it. But I remember these people primarily because they spoke the word of God to me, and I’m hoping most of you can remember similar people from your past as well. We remember those who led us, we remember those who first spoke the word of God to us, and we imitate their faith.

And the reason this brings stability is because the message of Jesus is the same today as it was back then, and it will always be the same. That’s why we have this statement in verse 9 that Jesus Christ is the same *“yesterday today and forever.”* Sometimes this verse is taken out of context, and I’ve seen a lot of that this week. In context, though, Jesus being the same is tied to those who first taught us the word of God. The message of Jesus is not new and unique, but it is an old, old story – the message of Jesus never changes. Jesus is to me exactly what he was to those who first taught me 40 or 50 years ago. Their faith is our faith.

The check and the balance here, though, is that we remember and follow these people only to the extent that they themselves faithfully follow the Lord. People can let us down, but I think the author of Hebrews accounts for that here. And although it’s not the point of the text, I think this reminds us that we also need to be worthy of being imitated at some point in the future. Forty or fifty years from now, we need to be the ones somebody is remembering. Now, there’s a fine line in letting our light shine (as Jesus tells us to do in Matthew 5) and, on the other hand, showing off. It seems to me that it’s all in our motivation. I’m thinking of what Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9, *“For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example.”* And then, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, where he said, *“Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”* Paul, then, made a point of living his life in a way that could be followed. He wasn’t showing off, but he was demonstrating what it means to live the Christian life. So also today, we can be the ones somebody remembers for how we taught and how we lived. And if they follow us as we follow Jesus, then they will also follow Jesus, because Jesus never changes.

But again, even good earthly leaders come and go, but Jesus is always there; he will never let us down. And the same Jesus who inspired my parents and my Bible class teachers when I was a kid continues to motivate

me even today. So, to avoid spiritual chaos, to have some sense of spiritual stability, we are to remember those who taught us the word of God.

II. And this leads us to verse 9, where we have the warning that WE ARE NOT TO BE CARRIED AWAY BY VARIED AND STRANGE TEACHINGS.

Or, to rephrase this in a more positive way, our only hope at some kind of spiritual stability is to hold on to that message we've been taught. But, don't allow yourselves to get carried away, he says! So, on one hand, we have the stability of Jesus and of those who've taught us the word of God, and on the other hand we have the danger of getting carried away. That's the message of Hebrews!

There's so much we could note here, but one of the first things that strikes me about this passage is how the word "**teachings**" (in verse 9) is plural. I've mentioned this over and over again through the years, but many years ago I think it was my dad who noted that every time the word "**teaching**" is singular in the New Testament, it refers to "**sound teaching**" (teaching that is good), but anytime the word teaching is plural, it refers to teaching that is false. In other words, there is one "**teaching**" that is good, and solid, and healthy, and true, but there are many "**teachings**" that are not. If you find an exception to that, please let me know. But that's the warning here in verse 9: Do not get carried away by varied and strange "**teachings,**" for there are many!

And in this case, he seems to give a special warning about some false teachings tied to food. We only need to think about what was happening back in those days. As many of those obeyed the gospel after spending a lifetime under those dietary restrictions from the Law of Moses, they had this new-found freedom. They suddenly realized that they could eat bacon, and shrimp, and pork tenderloin rib-eye chops with Bad Byron's Butt Rub seasoning! They came to understand that Jesus declared all foods clean (going back to Mark 7:19), but not everybody could appreciate that, and so some tried to bind what were now their opinions on the church: To be saved, there are certain things that you must not eat. Over in Colossians 2:20-23, Paul referred to those who were being influenced by false teachers, and he said,

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Some, then, were pressing these issues that were never carried over into the New Covenant (these food rules, in particular), and this pressure was often coming from members of their own family. And as a result, some were even tempted to give up on the Christian faith altogether. The author of Hebrews, though, makes the point that we are not to be carried away by that; but instead, the heart is to be strengthened by grace, not by the foods that we eat. And in this case, the "**foods**" might be a reference to foods that were consumed as a part of the sacrifices that were made under the Old Law (we'll get back to that in just a moment).

But for now, the idea is: To have some sense of stability, do not allow yourselves to get carried away by these varied and strange teachings. Instead, our teaching (singular) is to be as un-original as possible. I had a Bible professor many years ago who gave us the advice that as young preachers we should do our best to not be original. And at first, I thought he might have been suggesting that we not be creative in our preaching, but that wasn't it at all. His point was that we are preaching an ancient message, and in that regard, we really

should never be preaching anything that is truly new. Our message is the opposite of new, and that's what the author of Hebrews is suggesting here: We are not to get carried away by varied and strange teachings.

III. **As we come to the rest of this passage, we find that maintaining spiritual stability also involves RESPONDING TO THE MESSAGE, or we might even say that stability requires that we APPLY THE MESSAGE.**

And in this case, we apply the message of Hebrews by identifying with Jesus. We remember those who led us, we don't allow ourselves to get carried away by any of these whacked-out teachings (in this case, somebody pushing some special food we need to be eating), and the solution when this is the issue is that we realize that Jesus is our food! So, the author of Hebrews deals with this particular false teaching by applying the truth of God's word to it, that we identify with Jesus, by realizing that Jesus is the food that we eat.

Looking at this in context, it sounds like these people had some Jewish friends and family who were perhaps trying to get them to come back by saying: You guys don't have an altar like we do! How can you worship without an altar? And the answer is (in verse 10), ***"We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat."*** In other words, not only do we have an altar, but you guys don't even qualify to come to our altar! And then he uses this illustration from the Old Law. Going back to Leviticus, he mentions the sin offering, where the priests would make the offering, but instead of eating the meat like they did for most sacrifices, the sin offering had to be taken outside the camp and burned. And the author suggests that Jesus our sin offering. In fact, that's why Jesus had to be crucified outside the city gates. He came to fulfill the Law by removing the sin offering from the temple itself, and so he ***"suffered outside the gate."*** And the conclusion is, ***"So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach."*** Unlike some bull offered in the past, Jesus died outside the gate, and he's alive; in fact, he is worth following. And as long as you people hold on to those obsolete sacrifices, you will never be able to take advantage of this offering. And unlike the sin offering that couldn't be eaten, we actually eat our offering! Jesus is our food.

As we were preparing for today's worship late last week, I asked Caleb if we could sing "Break Thou the Bread of Life" this morning, and I asked if we could sing it at some point OTHER than right before the Lord's Supper. It's easy to think about that song as a Lord's Supper song, but really, it's not. Not that it would be wrong to sing it before the Lord's Supper, but the song is actually about Jesus being the word of God. He is the bread of life.

*Break Thou the Bread of Life, dear Lord, to me.
As Thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord
My spirit pants for Thee, O Living Word.*

Some songbooks have changed it to say "WITHIN the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord," and I think that's better than saying "BEYOND the sacred page." Poetic license, I suppose. But Jesus is the Living Word. He is the Bread of Life. Our altar, then, in a sense, is the cross, and our food is Jesus. He is the sacrifice that replaces all others, because Jesus is better.

I hope we realize how important this is, how earth-shattering it would have been to hear this. If you want to be holy, you no longer have to go to Jerusalem; no, you but actually LEAVE Jerusalem, and follow Jesus ***"outside the camp, bearing his reproach."*** Or, as Jesus himself said (in Matthew 16:24), ***"If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me."*** Under Judaism, anyone who was hung on a tree was cursed (according to Deuteronomy 21:22-23), but now we are actually saved by the cross

(1 Corinthians 1:18). We boast in the cross (Galatians 6:14). We are saved, then, when we identify with Jesus, when we join him in his death, burial, and resurrection – in baptism (according to Romans 6:3-4).

Today, we hear a lot about identity, “I identify as this or that.” However, we as God’s people identify with Jesus. I don’t identify primarily as a white, middle-class, cheese-head, heterosexual, American male; no, my primary identity is to be as a Christian, as a disciple of Jesus. Because of this, the author of Hebrews comes to the conclusion (in verse 14, ***“For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.”***) This earth is not our permanent home, and even this physical body and its desires is rather insignificant. All that I am belongs to Him. So, it’s not that we have to hate the cities in which we live; no, we can be thankful that we live here, but what we see around us is temporary, so the blessings we have are to be held loosely, in an open hand, allowing us to use our blessings of time and treasure for him, realizing that we have much better city waiting for us. We identify with Jesus.

Conclusion:

So far in this chapter, we’ve been encouraged to love one another, to show hospitality to strangers, to remember the prisoners; we’ve been commanded to keep the marriage bed pure; we’ve been told to keep ourselves pure from the love of money. And today, we’ve had some inspired advice concerning how to maintain some sense of spiritual stability, even in a time of religious chaos: 1.) We remember those who first taught us the word of God, 2.) We hold on to what we’ve learned, not allowing ourselves to get pulled away by varied and strange teachings, and 3.) We apply what we’ve learned from God’s word; in this particular case, by identifying with Jesus.

Let’s go to God in prayer and then Caleb will lead us in a song as we think about what we’ve learned this morning:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, our creator and redeemer. We come to you in prayer this morning, as a congregation of your people, and today, in a world of chaos and confusion, we pray for strong and stable faith. Bless us as we look to those who’ve gone before us for encouragement, and help us to imitate their faith, to the extent that they followed you. And where they fell short, we pray that we would challenge ourselves to press forward in hope.

Father, thank you for Jesus, who suffered and died for us. We pray for courage that we would have the strength to follow him outside the gate, and despising any shame, that we would always believe and do what is right, regardless of the consequences.

We love you, Father, and we come to you today through Jesus, who gave everything. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com