

Faithful Leaders
Hebrews 13:7-9

1 Corinthians 4
Ephesians 5:1-21
Responsive Isaiah 12

This morning we are going to continue our journey through chapter 13 of Hebrews as we are working to finish up this book. Today we are going to be looking at verses 7-9 as we see the Author here continues to lay out more principles and instruction to these Hebrews to which he writes. The verses we are looking at today are probably considered a bit controversial...or at least controversial compared to the previous 6. But again, these things that he is laying out are not so much instruction or rules which one must follow to be a redeemed child of God, but rather these are things that should be characteristic of the redeemed, these things which are traits of our heavenly father, should also likewise be traits that we find in ourselves and among others who claim the name of Christ. Let us start by reading verse 1-9

This week Aaron posted a Quote from Spurgeon which isn't anything that is really all that profound, but it is words to ponder. Spurgeon said, "Every Christian is either a missionary or an impostor." The reason why I say that this is not profound, yet is worthy of pondering is because it is describing a trait of the believer, something that should be a part of every believer, and it is so essential that if it doesn't exist then it doesn't matter what they claim to believe, it is likely it is their belief is false. It is the same with this instruction here as well, the first few verses are talking about something we call Christian hospitality, and is something that Christians should be known for.

We are not to be a bitter, angry, vengeful people, yet...this would seem to describe some of what we see today which calls itself Christian. Now I am not saying that we should be weak minded, spineless people, for there comes a time when we must with vigor defend the faith, and really this is one of those points. If one is not acting in accordance to the law of Christ, by that I mean having the traits of their father in heaven, then it is safe to say that God is not their father at all, and instead it is sin that rules which is evidence through their arrogance, pride, and outbursts of wrath. This was the very distinction made with the Pharisees and other religious leaders in Israel. They had all of the talk, they worshiped, read scripture, prayed, believed in Jehovah God, yet Christ called them white washed tombs, full of dead men's bones. Clean, and pretty, something that looks nice, but inside is full of rot and decay.

In John chapter 8, verse 44.. Jesus says, "If God were your father, you would love me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of myself, but he sent me. Why do you not understand my speech? Because you are not able to listen to my word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand on truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. Which if you convicts me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear because you are not of God. Again, it is the traits that define them, one may have the appearance of good, the appearance of Godliness, but unless it is from God, the appearance of godliness is nothing more than a tool for pride, arrogance, and self worth.

Now turning to our passage this morning, verse 7 in light of what we just read from the words of Jesus recorded in John, “remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you.” This is not the concept of just following a leader blindly, or giving one authority over your life, without first testing that what they are speaking is truly the word of God, otherwise they are not better than the religious leaders in Jesus' time. And instead of edifying and building you up, encouraging growth in the spirit, they will only seek to knock you down and manipulate so they can remain in control.

This is the tactic that cult leaders use, and if you don't think it is happening in churches which call themselves followers of Christ then you are sorely mistaken. You don't have to look to long before you can find examples of church leaders who have abused their power for their own glory and gain. These are not the leaders that we are to follow, for they are impostors, false teachers, wolves in sheep's clothing looking to devour and destroy, who have made the gospel into something to be sold, to be used for personal gain. Passages like this are used by men like this to bludgeon you into complacency, but that is not what the Author is talking about here.

The key once again to understand this verse, as it is with all of these verses here is in verse 1, which is to Let brotherly love continue. Why, would you submit yourself to a spiritual leader? It is not because he is wiser than you, or smarter than you, but it is because he loves you...and really, the true leader of a church body is a servant to that body. They are but one piece of the body in which God has given a call to just as he is giving us all a calling. Every member of the body has a purpose and a role, and none is elevated higher than another for one can not operate without the other. So again, we see that it really is this supernatural Christian love that rules in each and every one of us to serve not only God but each other in the ways that God calls us each to do so.

In today's churches we put so much emphasis I think on the pastor as the leader, or a team of elders, or deacons and it seems that we have this idea that all problems must be taken to this person of authority. But the reality is, that each and every one of us are called to this. Are we not all called to bear one another's burdens? Are we not all called to lift each other up? To encourage, and exhort one another? This is not just the role of the church leadership, but it is the role of the christian in the church body. Again, the trait of a true Christian is one who cares for and loves one another, and because of this will seek to help, to guide, encourage, and chastise if need be. I think that in some sense today, we have lost this idea of community, and we see the church as a hierarchy, ran like a business with a CEO and a board of directors, but really we are nothing more than a body of believers, equal in the eyes of Christ who are coming together to worship him, to fellowship with one another, to pray and encourage each other.

Further here in verse 7, he gives a sort of litmiss test to who these leaders in the church are, they are those who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, in other words... who do not just speak, but also live a life that can be defined by their faith. These are those of whom James talked about, who not only claimed faith, but through their actions proved their faith. It is those who are of the faith of Abraham, who when told by God to kill the promised son, believed that God would be faithful to his promise and would if need be raise Isaac from the dead. His belief and faith was put to action, and was proved. Again, this should be a trait of all who are of the seed of Abraham, that is not the physical descendants, but the spiritual. The Author here is saying, look to these as spiritual leaders, these who can be judged by the outcome of their conduct, whose faith follows the word of God they have spoken.

This doesn't necessarily have to be the pastor, or elders, or deacons in the church for there are those in the church who match this description but do not hold any official title. But the other side of this coin...is that if there is one, or some who are looking to you in this fashion, as a spiritual leader then you have the responsibility to conduct yourself as one, that is, humbly, and mercifully, serve as is necessary, and as God has called.

An example that comes to mind is Casey, for he is filling this role with this bi-weekly bible study group. He is not actively holding an official title within the church, but he is acting as one who is a teacher, with authority, as he leads and guides that study group. He is a leader, who is serving through ministering the gospel so that God willing some may grow, and some may through the word come to believe. So in short, my point here is that while yes, this is talking about the leaders in the church, I think it is also talking about in a way each and every one of us, for at times we may fill this role for one another, to serve one another in this way and we must do so out of mutual respect and love for one another, not seeking gain, or selfish ambition, be wary that we do not fall into sin allowing pride and arrogance to come in and rule. But instead, understand that these positions of authority, or leadership is to mirror our savior. Who was both, God and yet man, who had all authority, yet came to serve, who was eternal, and mighty, yet laid down his life to die. Driven by mercy, grace and love, endured with much suffering the death on the cross, to save some.

So too is the ministry, so too is leadership in the body of the church, it is not a position of absolute authority, but is a position of servitude. I think that it would benefit many pastors today to reflect upon this very thing, and it is because of this I think that there is a healthy aspect of God's calling the unwilling into such roles. Quite a few years ago, I knew someone who had said he attended seminary to become a pastor, but he was an Atheist, he didn't believe in God...but as he said, what better job is there then only having to put together a short speech and work 1 day out of the week? Or another example of this very principle comes from where I work. It seems often times the ones who seek roles, such as trainers are usually the ones who shouldn't be trainers. They are seeking this authority for their own gain, they see it as a way to gain merit, while also being able to slack off and not do the work. We must be wary of those that we put in leadership in the church, or that we hold as spiritual leaders in our lives that it is not such as these.

And we know the world is full of them, we saw quite a few back when we were going through the pastoral search process. This doesn't mean that God doesn't put the desire on peoples heart to become ministers, or missionaries..but that is the key, the desire must come from God, and it must be driven by God...not out of selfish desire. And we must be mindful, and wise enough to discern this. Which we can do, with the principles the author has laid down here, in other examples laid out such as we see in Titus, such a leader should be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. He must be blameless as a steward of God, not self willed, not quick tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, and self controlled holding fast the faithful word which he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

This leader that is worthy of such respect as the author in Hebrews is instructing is one such as listed in Titus, for his focus is upon the ministry of the word, and the love for the brethren, not out of self ambition, greed, or power needs. By this standard sadly it would seem that many pastors, deacons, and elders would be disqualified.

We tend to put more attention on whether or not that they have attended seminary and got a degree than the traits that are necessary for such a leader. All of this doesn't just apply to a church body seeking a minister, it also applies to any individual who is seeking a church to join. The same level of discernment that is used in the seeking of a pastor should also be used in the seeking of a local church body. But again, just as it seems many fall short of these ministerial requirements who are infact leaders within the church body, it is the same with those who are seeking a church. They fall short in assessing these matters of importance, and rather look at the superficial things such as the size of the church, or whether or not it can meet their felt needs with programs, and events.

The pastors and leaders in the church are less ministers of the word and more administrators of a corporation whose function is to grow and sustain itself as opposed to growing and sustaining people in the word of God. These are not leaders who should be followed, who should be lifted up or submitted to for they are not acting in the best interest of the body, but rather of themselves.

Verse 8, here in Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever." This to lays forth a simple principle for those who are preaching, teaching, or a leader within the church. There is no new revelation, there is no new information about Christ today then there ever has been. There is no prophets with new visions, no teachers with new revelations, If there is one who is claiming to be such, do not follow them, in fact flee for they are false prophets, they are false teachers and their intent is not one of glorifying God, but rather is to lead people astray. They are tools of Satan, who twist the word, and use personality, and eloquent speech to drive followers away from God and into the pits of hell.

We have talked about this subject over and over again, and it has to do with the sovereignty of God. The God who created the universe is the same God who rules and reigns today. He has not changed, his will and plan for mankind has not been thwarted or subverted. The God of the old testament, is the God of the new, he is one, he is eternal, and he is unchanging. This is why scripture itself is timeless, this is why the gospel is relevant in every age, and this is why the function of the church and its leadership needs to be about this gospel and unchanging message for it is only in this that there is salvation, and it is only in this that there is hope for mankind. Our hope doesn't rest upon how we feel at the moment, often times we can feel trapped, or left behind, or angry..but that does not make our hope in christ any less, how we feel about it doesn't change the reality of it.

One of the big criticisms I have heard about churches that people are looking to attend, is they don't want to attend one that upsets, or offends them, they want to get that spiritual high on Sunday, they want to be reassured, coddled, and pumped up. Now I ask, should those things happen in the church? Well of course they should....but it should never been the soul purpose of the church, but rather the outcome of believers gathering together. The church and it's leaders must preach the word, must be faithful to scripture and yes...that may offend, it may step on toes...but to the believer who hears it, even though convicting..they are sweet words, for through such conviction is a growth in faith, and a coming closer to Christ. Verse 9 here this morning is a big one...it was directed to this group of Hebrews, it could be said about the Galatians...it could be said about us today.

This is again, a timeless warning for the church is always under threat and attack from false teachers and preachers. Verse 9. "Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them."

This is just a reiteration of this point, be wary of your leaders, be wary of those who you look up to in the faith, test to be sure that which they are teaching is indeed from the word, without selfish ambition, and pride. For this is the tool of false teachers, they will create new doctrines, twist scripture to fit their selfish ambitions, and use it as a tool to lock you into submission. Again, flee these people for they will only do you harm.

The author here makes a vague reference to the Jewish leaders and belief when he says not to be occupied by foods for it did not profit them. Again it is choosing the sign over the substance. The error of Israel was their inability to see how all that God had given them was to bring them to the understanding for their need for a savior, that they themselves could not be righteous, and they were given signs, prophecies, laws, and traditions to point to these things. But they rejected it all, and in pride and arrogance elevated their traditions, worshiped their laws and worship practices over the Messiah which all of these things pointed to.

The lesson here, is to not be distracted by these things which are unprofitable, do not focus on the function, or the programs, or the size of the church. Do not focus on the entertainment of the service, but judge the word, judge the leadership by the standards put forth in scripture. If your church does not meet these standards, then leave and find one that does, for if the body is more concerned on its outward appearance then it is more then likely dead inside. It is better for your soul to meet with those in an old run down building with a leaky roof if they truly love God, and have this godly love for each other and are true to scripture then with a group who seems to have everything perfect, and pretty but devoid of love, and sound biblical teaching. If you think that sounded like a shameless plug for Spurgeon heritage....then I think you are right :)

This advice, and instruction goes for us as well as for anyone else. Once the focus is wrong, once a body of believers leaves their first love and begins to look toward other things it is a beginning of the end. We are seeing so many so called Christian organizations, groups, churches, and pastors fall into the traps of our society today. Seeking to change the gospel to make it more inviting, being accepting of sinful behaviors and lifestyles all under the guise of showing forth God's love, the have forgotten, that God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. He has not changed, and though society may change and go through phases of darkness, the light of God's word should only shine brighter. We must be determined not to falter, not to give in, not to bow down...but to stand firm upon the word, to preach, to edify, and exhort one another to remain faithful and believing in the unchanging God of hope.

Ultimately those who through pressures, or selfish ambition leave aside the truth of the gospel and go chasing after anything else will fail. It is God who sustains his church, it is God who sets forth and calls those to teach and stand for the truth, and all who turn aside will fall. So let us be all the more determined to be this body who remains faithful when it seems that all else is falling around us. May Spurgeon Heritage Church be a bastion of hope for the lost, and a place of comfort to the hurting, may God be pleased to bless, and to guard and protect her. Let us be ever more vigilant to be faithful and true to his word, to be the intentional community of Christian believers that we are called to be.