

PEOPLE, PITFALLS, & PRINCIPLES

(13:1–14)

We have noted that Hebrews “begins like a treatise, continues like a sermon, and concludes like a letter.”¹ Neil R. Lightfoot called chapter 13 “an extended postscript”² to the book as a whole. We find in it a series of short closing instructions, given in rapid order. We will cover the first part of the chapter in this lesson and the latter part in our final lesson.

PEOPLE TO HELP (13:1–3)

(1) *Brethren³ need love* (v. 1). The writer of Hebrews had previously commended the readers regarding their love for the saints (6:10). Now he urged them to *continue* in that love (see 1 Peter 4:8; 2 John 5).

(2) *Strangers need hospitality* (v. 2). In context, “strangers” probably refers to Christians they had not previously met. Hospitality is a vital Christian activity (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9). In that day, hospitality was a practical necessity: Most inns were undesirable places to stay, and most Christians were poor. The text emphasizes that unexpected blessings can come from being hospitable.

(3) *The afflicted need sympathy* (v. 3). Christians were imprisoned for their faith and suffered in other ways. In the past, the readers had shown sympathy to those in prison (10:34). Now they were encouraged to continue to put themselves in the place of the afflicted, to share with them. True sympathy expresses itself in action (Matthew 25:36; see James 2:15, 16).

¹Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1976), 43.

²*Ibid.*, 245.

³As usual, “brethren” is used generically to refer to both male and female Christians.

PITFALLS TO AVOID (13:4–6)⁴

(1) *Fornication and adultery* (v. 4). “Adultery” refers to sexual sin involving a person who is married to someone else. “Fornication” is a more general term, referring in this verse to any other kind of sexual sin (for instance, sexual relations between two people who are not scripturally married to each other). *Sex in marriage* is said to be “honourable” (KJV) and “undefiled.” The necessary conclusion is that, outside of marriage, it is dishonorable and defiled. This instruction was greatly needed in a day when moral standards were low and sexual activity had been incorporated into the “worship” of pagan gods. This admonition is still greatly needed today.

(2) *Covetousness and discontent* (vv. 5, 6). Christians are urged not to be covetous, but rather to be content. God has promised to be with us. With Him on our side, we should fear nothing. This teaching had special meaning to the original readers who could lose so much, including their lives, if they remained faithful to Christ. This truth also has special meaning to us—including those individuals who have much but who still remain dissatisfied.

PRINCIPLES TO HEED (13:7–14)

(1) *Do imitate faithful teachers* (v. 7). The original readers of Hebrews were told to remember those who had originally taught them (see 2:1–4) and then imitate their godly lives. Great examples demonstrate what is possible. These Christians *could* be faithful. The examples of those who had gone before proved that it could be done.

⁴Another way to phrase this main heading would be “Pitfalls That Hinder.”

(2) *Do not be carried away by error* (vv. 8, 9). The teaching they had received from their former leaders had not changed because the One who had given it to them—Jesus—had not changed (v. 8). Since this was the case, they should not leave that teaching for “varied and strange teachings” (v. 9a). The original readers probably knew what these “strange teachings” were. Since “food” is mentioned, perhaps the teachings related to Old Testament dietary laws. Regardless of what “strange teachings” might have been circulating among these brethren, false doctrines could not bless them. Only new-covenant grace could bring blessings then, as now.

Verse 8 has special significance today. “The faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3) is still applicable because Jesus is our Great Contemporary. We *still* have help from our living High Priest. We *still* must not be carried away by “strange teachings”—no matter how appealing they may seem.

(3) *Do follow Jesus* (vv. 10–14). The last five verses of the section use Old Testament terminology to contrast Judaism with Christianity.

An altar. Christians have “an altar” (sacrifice) which those under the old covenant did not have (v. 10). That altar/sacrifice is the cross of Jesus, on which His blood was shed.

A camp. Jesus’ sacrifice was made “outside the camp” (vv. 11, 13; see v. 12). When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, “the camp” was where they set up their tents and dwelled. As the sacrifice was made “outside the camp,” so people must “go out to Him [Jesus] outside the camp” (v. 13a). To leave “the camp” meant to leave the Jewish establishment. Jewish Chris-

tians were being admonished to cut all ties with Judaism. They needed to follow Jesus, being prepared to suffer (v. 13b) and counting it all worthwhile because of the heavenly “city” awaiting them (v. 14).

A city. Our text closes by emphasizing that we are on a pilgrimage (13:14; see 11:8–16). My teacher, Neil Lightfoot,⁵ urged his class, “Memorize verse 14. Maybe even write it on your wall.” He said, “What a difference it would make if we really believed this verse! It would put things in perspective for us. Much that concerns us and so many things that irritate us would be seen as trivial.” He then said, “The verse says ‘we are *seeking* the city which is to come.’ What are you and I seeking?” David Roper

⁵Neil R. Lightfoot, ACU extension class on Hebrews taught in Fort Worth, Texas, 26 October 1985.

SERMON NUGGET

LEADERSHIP & “FOLLOWER-SHIP” IN THE CHURCH (13:17)

Hebrews 13:17 provides a clue to the solution of many problems in the Lord’s church. What the church needs is better leaders and better followers.

- I. *Elders can be better leaders* by recognizing that their job is to “watch over” the souls of the members.
- II. *Members are to respect the elders* who watch for their souls. Some problems attributed to poor leadership are really problems of poor “follower-ship.” Coy Roper

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