

EQUIPPED FOR EVERY GOOD THING

SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

By Steve Zeisler

Early in this century, Gutzon Borglund gazed at a granite cliff set in the Black Hills of South Dakota. With his artist's eye, he envisioned on that cliff what no one else could see—the sculpted images of some of the great figures in American history. Mount Rushmore Memorial, the five-story high visages of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln, took more than 14 years to complete. The sculptors who worked on that massive undertaking were suspended on ropes 500 feet above the valley floor as they worked, and they used every tool, from chisels to dynamite, in the creation of the well-loved national monument.

The theme of the book of Hebrews is that our Heavenly Father, working as a great artist, creates something magnificent out of ordinary people. He saw in fallen humanity what we would never have believed of ourselves: that he could transform our lives so that they would become magnificent and beautiful, and of service to him.

Here is the well-loved benediction with which the author ends the book:

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20, 21)

Consider what is described here: people like you and me, made of the most ordinary clay, equipped by God to do his will, and live in the way he wants us to live. Here is what he is working in us: "...that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever..." Oh, the greatness of the story—that God would make something beautiful out of our lives, and that we would live in a way that pleases him!

In this book we have seen the kinds of tools which God uses in his work to urge us and press us to become the kind of people who desire to carry out his will. These tools form the themes that are repeated throughout the book.

One of these themes is the creative portrayal of the person and work of Jesus Christ. More than anything else, this is a book about Jesus Christ. Here the author sets forth the various facets of the personality and work of our Lord. Jesus is displayed as fully human, as our High Priest, as the Son of God, and the very image of God. Hebrews 2:4 declares that we see Jesus, and as our understanding of him grows, our lives become more and more as God intended them to be.

Another theme is the distinguishing of what is earthly and visible from heavenly realities. Time and again we discover that behind earthly religion, with its cities and tents and tabernacles, there is the unseen work of God (a heavenly tabernacle and sacrifice; the city which is to come). This distinction also becomes a tool in the hands of God to teach us and change us as we learn to reject the old covenant and embrace the new.

Furthermore, Hebrews comments on the lessons we should learn from the history of Israel, and also from yet future events; in particular, the time when everything that can be shaken will be shaken. The letter also includes both sweet encouragement and frightening warning. We are encouraged to remember that Jesus Christ has faced

everything that we will ever face. He knows what it's like to be tempted. He understands weakness. He is committed to using and changing and supplying the needs of people who fail. And our failure will never keep us from him. His blood covers our sins. Yet, the book contains sobering warnings against becoming sealed in rebellion against God, and the fearful condition that will result for those who refuse the Lord. So encouragement and warnings become tools in the hands of God to sculpt us into becoming what we ought to be.

Chapter 13 deals with how we should live as Christians. As God is "equip[ping us] in every good thing to do his will," this chapter gives us insight as to how Christians ought to live, act and think. Two issues occupy most of this section. The first is in verse 1: "Let love of the brethren continue." The verses immediately following are a commentary on what brotherly love ought to be like.

The second theme is highlighted at the beginning of verse 7: "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result [outcome] of their conduct [way of life], imitate their faith." Here we are instructed to consider what is wise behavior. We are to imitate those whose character qualifies them to speak about life, and thereby grow in wisdom. Thus, love and wisdom are the themes that the writer takes up in this chapter.

Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body. Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge. Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU," so that we confidently say,

**"THE LORD IS MY HELPER,
I WILL NOT BE AFRAID.**

WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?" (Hebrews 13:1-6)

"Let love of the brethren continue." Three arenas in which that love can be expressed are suggested here. First, outreach beyond the comfortable circle in which we ordinarily live. If we would express the love of God, then we must learn the difficult choice of reaching out and caring for people who perhaps cannot repay us. We must be willing to care for those who are incapable of adding to our prestige; they may, in fact, diminish it. We must learn to be generous, to remove the barriers that tend to keep us safely inside a tight circle of friendships with people just like us.

"Do not neglect to show hospitality," we are told. Hospitality is not merely inviting people into your home and expecting an invitation from them in return. Hospitality means reaching out beyond your circle to care for people who are different than you, who may, in fact, be in need and dependent on the generosity of others.

"Remember the prisoners...and those who are ill-treated." We are reminded that we, too, have physical bodies so that we can empathize with those who are incarcerated in prison, or hospitalized, or otherwise alone. It is also suggested that God may bless you as you reach out beyond your own safe circle and begin caring for people. You may find that you get as much in return as you give. Without your being aware of it, you may find yourself entertaining angels, messengers from God who bring blessing to your life.

Years ago, a young man diagnosed as manic-depressive spent a summer living with us in our home. He was suffering terribly, in deep depression. The one who actually succeeded in reaching him and breaking through the cloud of his depression was my daughter, who was a toddler at the time. Every day she insisted that he get up out of bed and join her in life. He would have spent all day curled in a ball in his bed, but she bounced into the room every morning, jumped up on his bed, and talked about everything that was going on in her world. Her toddler's

hospitality helped him get on his feet. She spent more time talking to him than anyone else. She was the one whose hospitality, joy, and openness finally helped him break out of his gloom.

Our homes can be places where such hospitality is offered to people who need it. We should invite them into our lives in such a way that God gives blessing both to them and to us as a result. If we are being sculpted by the Lord to be the kind of people we ought to be, then we will find ourselves loving in this manner. We will break down barriers, and demonstrate hospitality and concern for those who are in need. As a result of our doing that, God is honored.

The most recent issue of *Christianity Today* discusses at some length the situation of South Africa today. While there are no easy answers to what is happening in that country, the magazine comments on the fact that the major warring factions, blacks and whites and coloreds, all have Christian traditions. What a tragedy it is that legal and economic barriers separate Christians! The magazine relates two stories that are illustrative of the concern raised here that we reach out in love and show hospitality to others.

One South African Dutch Reformed minister told of a phone call he received from a parishioner whose black servant had died suddenly.

“Have you notified the servant’s relatives?”

“I don’t know where he lived,” replied the parishioner.”

“Then check with the government registration office.”

“But we don’t know his name. We only knew him by his first name.”

“How long did he work for you?”

“Thirty years.”

The second story concerns a man named Eddie Mhlanga, a black staff-physician at the University of Natal hospital. He talked about the care that had been shown him when he was young by a white missionary doctor:

More than anything else Dr. Howard did not discriminate. “He didn’t seem to notice the color of my skin and treated me like a member of his own family.” Eddie’s fondest memory is sitting at the doctor’s table among family members and invited guests as they celebrated his sixteenth birthday.

“No joy was ever sweeter than the joy of being accepted as an equal,” he recalls.

Despite the political and economic pressures, Christians in South Africa, or in any nation, can break down barriers and care for people. If we would live lives that are “pleasing in his sight,” then we must express love by caring for others.

Marriage is the second arena in which love should continue to grow and express itself. Verse 4 says, “Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” Marriage is a lifetime responsibility of learning to share oneself with somebody, of living with hurts received and hurts directed, of forgiveness, joy and reunion. Marriage is a long, sometimes awkward dance in which two people who are selfish and in need of forgiveness learn slowly, by the grace of God, to build something beautiful and lasting, raise children and establish a home. Scripture says that healthy marriages are an encouragement to others to show Christian love. It is an arena where genuine Christian forgiveness and real intimacy are learned.

“Marriage is to be held in honor among all.” Today, certain voices are raised against the glory, the beauty, the hard work and the wonder of marriage. It is sometimes suggested that the most spiritual ones will not marry at all. There are some remnants of that thinking in the Catholic church today. Priests are forbidden to marry, presumably because celibacy is more spiritual. The notion that married life is second best must be resisted. The message of this passage of Scripture is that marriage is honorable; it is pleasing to God; and it should be held in honor by all.

Others view marriage as secondary to career and other pursuits. When they have a good career and financial security, they say, then they may consider the possibility of marriage, so long as it does not demand too much from them. Such selfishness resists commitment and the growth that goes with it, and devalues what ought to be honored and sought after. “Let marriage be held in honor among all.”

The second point that is made here about marriage is that impurity is to be avoided. Not only should marriage be held in honor, but “the marriage bed” (i.e. married sex) should be undefiled. Fornication, adultery, any sexual expression outside of marriage should be avoided. God himself judges in these matters. It is often assumed that sexual sin can be gotten away with, but “fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”

Chapter 5 of Proverbs comments on both sides of this verse in Hebrews. Marriage is good and should be held in honor by all. Our sexual experience in marriage should be one of purity and one of commitment to healthy intimacy. Here is what the father says to his son in Proverbs 5:15-22:

Drink water from your own cistern
and fresh water from your own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone
and not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
be exhilarated always with her love.
For why should you, my son,
be exhilarated with an adulteress
and embrace the bosom of a foreigner?
For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD,
and He watches all his paths.
His own iniquities will capture the wicked,
and he will be held with the cords of his sin.

Delight in your wife; avoid sexual sin, says the book of Proverbs. That is exactly what Hebrews is commanding us to do. We should value, support and rejoice in marriage, and avoid sexual sin.

A third area of concern follows the teaching about outreach to strangers and honor in marriage. Love of the brethren is threatened by love of money. Verses 5 and 6: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,” so that we confidently say, “THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?” Contrast the thinking of these verses with the advice of Ivan Boesky, the man who was recently fined a hundred million dollars by the United States government for abusing inside information he received as a Wall Street trader. He spoke last year to the Business School students at the University of California, and this was his advice: “Greed is all right, by the way. I want you to know that. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.” It is recorded that the students laughed and cheered at his words. But Scripture says to let your way of life be free from the love of money—a love that controls and dominates your thinking.

Rather, Christians are told, “be content with what they have.” The verse goes on to talk about what we have that should make us content: “Be content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.’” Our relationship with Christ will never end. We should be content with whatever finances and security goes with that. But, most of all, we should be content with him. “I will never leave you.” Money seems to provide power and security. But Christ himself is committed to supplying our needs and we would be foolish to love money instead of him.

In summary, let love of the brethren continue. For Christ’s sake, reach out beyond your own small world. Let your marriages and your support of marriage be such that Christ is honored in your communities. And thirdly, let your way of life be free from the love of money.

Beginning at verse 7, the second of the categories I suggested to you is raised. This is a more difficult section to interpret, but it begins and ends with instruction about Christian leaders, saying that their way of life, if it is godly, should be imitated. They are to be obeyed, submitted to, and supported. The point here is that life can throw a lot of difficult situations at you, especially if you are trying to understand the purposes and thinking of God. You can lose your way very easily. Thus, the Lord supplies to communities, churches and groups, godly, experienced leadership to help us through difficult choices.

Not all leadership is godly, of course. You should examine what you hear and examine the conduct of those who are put in leadership. But if it is godly, then support that leadership. Follow their example. Benefit from the wisdom that all of us need from those who have gone before us and have taken the time to learn of the things of God.

We will consider these verses, then, in that light—the requirement for wisdom:

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 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. We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. 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. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come.

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.
(Hebrews 13:7-17)

The first area in which godly leadership can serve as a great help to us is mentioned in verse 9: “Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings.” In every generation, Christians will be set upon by teachers who teach error, who are seeking self-aggrandizement in the name of Christ. And often their teaching has to do with other appetites, such as food, as mentioned here.

When this letter was written, apparently, there was some strange doctrine being espoused that promoted special attention to particular foods, or abstinence from certain kinds of food. This teaching was being offered as godly wisdom, and it was confusing people. I read recently of a man in Seattle who leads a group of Christians and teaches that sensual dancing has a beneficial effect on their spiritual life. These sorts of teachings usually have

peculiar and perhaps alluring elements to them. If we are going to be kept from listening to them and being derailed by them, we need the example of godly leadership.

The second issue the writer speaks of in these verses is the huge and ponderous institution of the Jewish temple, and the thousands of priests who attended it. Having discussed strange teachings about food, the author of Hebrews now turns to consider the supply of food for the priests. They would take meat that had been offered on the altar (the blood had its religious significance), and eat it for a meal. God provided that the priests should be fed that way. But the institution of the temple worship took on a shameful growth, dominance and control of the people of God. It had become an institution that served itself, not the spiritual needs of the people.

In verses 10 and 11 we are reminded that there is one sacrifice, on the Day of Atonement, when the priests do not get to eat the meat from the animals that are sacrificed. On that day the meat is taken outside the camp and burned to show God's concern for human sin. In speaking of these things, the author is reminded that Jesus was rejected by the religious institutions of his day—by the priests and elders of the people. He was rejected as Messiah, and he was executed as a criminal outside the walls of the city. We should expect in our day as well to find Christ outside the structures of rich and powerful religious institutions that exist increasingly to serve themselves.

How are we going to know the difference between proper and godly organizations and those institutions that reject the Lord? Well, we need shepherds who care for us, who help us see the difference between human religion that serves itself and the presence of Christ who is sought so that he can be known and loved. And a warning is given. Institutions can take over. Do not let them. So we ought to support and encourage godly leadership that can help us make our way through the maze.

Next, we come to a discussion of sacrifices. All Christians have in their hearts a desire to respond to God. We want to bring something to the Lord. We want to act in some way that shows our devotion to him. But the sacrifices that God cares about are not animals but those spoken of in verse 15: "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." First, he wants us to speak his praises, to confess his name in the world. What offering can you make to him that would bless him? Well, one of them is for you to be a spokesman who praises him and confesses him.

Verse 16 also talks about sacrifices that God cares about: "...do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." Do you do good? Do you look for ways to benefit people, spread joy, and promote life? Do you share what you have? Are you one of those people who likes to give away the things that God has given you? Those are the sacrifices that please God.

How are we going to learn to live the kind of lives that defend us against strange teaching, that keep us from being caught up in religious institutions where Jesus is no longer present? How are we going to learn to live lives that make an offering to the Lord that is really pleasing to him? Well, we need to promote and support those godly and wise men and women who have gone before us. So, "consider the result [outcome] of their conduct [way of life]..." verse 7 says, and "imitate their faith."

The last verses, 18 through 25, contain ordinary details that friends are apt to write to one another. A friend of mine called me from Grenoble, France, last week telling me that he would soon be coming to California to conduct business and visit Christian friends. We talked about accommodations for him, greetings to our respective families, etc. That is exactly the concern of some of these last verses in Hebrews.

Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. And I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you the sooner. (Hebrews 13:18, 19)

The writer wants to come and see these Christians, so he asks for their prayers for his travel arrangements.

But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I will see you. Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.

Grace be with you all. (Hebrews 13:22-25)

“Say ‘hi’ to the wife and kids. Timothy has just gotten out of jail and he will come if he can. We will all be there for Thanksgiving.” That is the kind of information we have here. As ordinary and unimpressive as these things are on the surface, however, it is more evidence of Christian love and faithfulness.

Let us end where we began, with the well-known prayer at the end of Hebrews. God is sculpting us, using tools that shape us into something of stupendous value; instilling within us the life of his Son so that we are equipped and formed to do his will. He is working in us that which is pleasing in his sight—lives that are actually pleasing to him as he sees us make our way through the world. His workmanship is beautiful. What is expressed in our thoughts, in our actions, in our deeds, becomes artistic and magnificent. And worthy of him.

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen

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Steve Zeisler
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[Back to Index page](#)

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