

A Better Way of Life

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 7th of December 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better Way of Life and is based on Hebrews chapter 13 verses 7 to 19.

You may like to have open the passage from Hebrews on page 979 in the Black Bibles in the pews, page 979. I worked out during the week this is the 20th sermon of the series on Hebrews that we began in about February with a few gaps in between.

And some of you may be relieved to know that next week is the 21st and last of the series. So let's pray. O God, our Heavenly Father, thank you that in your mercy and goodness to us you reveal yourself and your purposes for us so clearly in the words of the Scriptures.

We pray that as we come to these words today that your word will appear to our very heart, be written on our heart that we may be changed to not only trust it but do it and all for the glory of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 15] Amen. Amen. Well, if you're like me, when you go to the supermarket you notice that everything seems to be new and improved. So the washing powder is new and improved.

The cat food is new and improved. Computers every day become newer and more improved. Cars the same. Even cricketers have new and improved bowling actions. We need something to get Tendulkar out.

And it's hard to keep up in society if everything all the time is changing to become new and improved. And there are plenty of people who say that Christianity is not new and it's not improved.

It's out of date. It's old fashioned. It's really lost it. And so that Christianity might need to become new and improved if it's to be up to date for the 21st century. There's a retired bishop, a notorious bishop from America, a heretic really, called Bishop John Spong who was recently in Australia.

And he's promoting what he calls a new Christianity for a new century or something to that effect. Gene Robinson, the recently consecrated openly homosexual bishop in North America, said that we're in a process of new understandings of God and therefore in effect new Christianity, new practices of the Christian faith.

[2 : 30] And there are always theologians around who are on about new interpretations of the Bible and therefore a new Christianity to keep up to date and so on. So there are people who say to us that Christianity of the old and the past is outdated and we need something therefore that is new, more tolerant, more relevant, less demanding usually is what they want, less offensive, less primitive perhaps.

And so today there are what we might call a whole range of all sorts and kinds of strange teachings around. And it is easy to be carried away by such teachings.

On the surface sometimes they look appealing, they look plausible perhaps, rational, certainly they're less demanding and that is often a great attraction for many people, satisfying itching ears.

And certainly for some Christians we want to appear to be up to date, appear to be trendy and modern and so maybe we're tempted to think that new ideas might just be the answer for the declining church in the Western world.

Well the letter to the Hebrews was written to Christians nearly 2,000 years ago who were in danger of drifting from the Christian faith. For some of them their danger of drifting was because they were fearful of the threat of persecution which was around in their society.

[3 : 56] And so fearful of persecution they back away from the Christian faith. For some of them it was the temptation of the world, the attraction of wealth or money or possessions or something else in the world that was drifting them away from the Christian faith.

For many of the readers they'd come out of being Jews and then were converted to Christianity. And so for some of them it seems in this letter the attraction of drifting away from the Christian faith was to drift back into Jewish practices whether that included then sacrifices but certainly Jewish food laws and rituals and regulations and so on.

And some perhaps were tempted to move into so-called newfangled ideas of Christianity, new, better, improved messages of the Gospel. And the letter to the Hebrews was written as we've seen through this year to encourage such people not to drift.

To encourage them to persevere in the Christian faith. And for perseverance that means the same Gospel. Perseverance is not moving from from an old, outdated, old-fashioned Gospel into something new and better and improved.

But rather this letter is urging its readers to persevere in the same Gospel about the same Lord Jesus Christ and the same means of salvation as we've seen throughout this letter.

[5 : 25] Because behind this writer's view as we've seen throughout the year you can't better the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the best salvation, the best hope, the best way of life that there is.

There is nothing better. And no new formula, no new recipe, no new packaging will ever improve the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So in this little passage we're dealing with today in the middle of the last chapter, chapter 13 the writer begins by saying remember your leaders.

Not that they've forgotten perhaps who they were personally but remember what they taught and how they lived is in effect what's behind it. Verse 7 is referring probably to the original leaders, pastors or teachers who brought these people to Christian faith.

And so the writer is saying remember them, what they taught and how they lived. Those who taught you the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He then says in verse 7 consider the outcome of their way of life.

Now we're not sure entirely what he refers to there. It may be that they were martyred for their faith, put to death for being Christians. And so the outcome of their life might look to be unattractive but actually they're being encouraged to persevere in the face of persecution by remembering that.

[6 : 47] But it may just be that they weren't martyred but just persevered and were faithful to the Gospel that they once preached. So that sometime in the past they preached the Gospel and these people were converted.

They're still preaching the same Gospel maybe in another place, maybe the same place. We're not sure. But they're persevering and that is what is being commended to the readers of this letter. And thirdly verse 7 is saying imitate their faith.

Not just their style but imitate the content of their faith, what they believed. Make sure that you believe what they taught and what they believe but also imitate their faithfulness to what they believe, their perseverance in keeping on with the Gospel that they taught.

So in a sense if you remember back to chapter 11 there are a long list of Old Testament characters who are the heroes of faith that we are to remember and emulate. Well in a sense these Christian teachers and leaders are part of that list of heroes of faith.

Remember them, what they taught, what they believed and how they lived and imitate such faith. And then he says in verse 8 in words that are very well known Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

[8 : 04] Now we must be careful not to make too much of that statement and see what it is saying in its context here. Remember your leaders and their faith. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, forever.

Don't go after new teachings is the next verse. You see what it's saying in verse 8 about Jesus Christ being the same yesterday, today and forever is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the same.

Jesus hasn't changed. There's no new, better, improved Saviour. Jesus is the same. The Gospel is the same and what your teachers taught you who brought you to faith said and believed that is the Gospel for you to believe and hold on to.

not to move on to something else, not to move on to a new perception of who Jesus might have been but to the truth that was first taught and keeps on being taught and for us, 2,000 years later, the same Gospel about the same Saviour, the same Jesus Christ.

So verse 9 then is the warning. Don't be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. Now at the heart of any strange teaching, at the heart of any religious teaching really, is the issue of salvation.

[9 : 15] What does this teaching teach me about how people and God can get together and how people can be saved? What does it teach? And so whenever you get people with white shirts and ties knocking at your door with little badges telling you they're elder so and so, the issue to get to the heart of is how does their teaching tell me I am saved?

And in the end it's one of two ways. Either it is totally the work of God in Jesus Christ or we do something towards it.

It is either God's work or my work. It is either what we might call grace or my works. And in the end no matter what religious system we're talking about it falls into one of those two categories.

And Christianity alone, the true gospel that was taught by these original leaders that is espoused by the writer of this letter is clearly through the New Testament of the Scriptures is that salvation is entirely the work of God in the Lord Jesus Christ dying on a cross for us and that is God's grace.

Something we don't earn, we don't deserve, we don't merit. The alternative in whatever formal guise of teaching it is is that somehow we have to do something in order to be saved and thus the work of Jesus on the cross is diminished.

[10 : 51] The writer of this letter has made it abundantly clear in almost every chapter, some easy and some hard to understand, that Jesus' work for us is absolutely and totally sufficient for our salvation for eternity.

And any other strange teaching, any other so-called new or better or improved gospel in fact diminishes Jesus Christ and is to be resisted because Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever and that means that what he's done for us is absolutely, totally and fully sufficient for our salvation with God for eternity.

So notice how the writer then says it in the second half of verse 9. Having said don't be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings, he says then that it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace and not by regulations about food which have not benefited those who observe them and that's probably referring back to the readers being tempted to go back into Jewish laws and regulations which included all sorts of rules about food and what you could and couldn't eat and so on.

Rather than rules and regulations about what we do in order to be right with God, our heart is to be strengthened by grace. What God has done in Jesus Christ that is totally, fully sufficient for our salvation.

Rules and regulations bring no benefit, verse 9 finishes by saying, but grace is what benefits us and fits us for a relationship with God for eternity. So if the heart of wrong teaching is the issue of salvation as it always is, then the sacrificial death of Jesus is the hub of the matter.

[12 : 42] What does false teaching, what does true teaching teach about the death of Jesus for our salvation? What sort of sacrifice does wrong teaching teach is required for salvation?

What sort of sacrifice is required for forgiveness or the atonement for sin? Is it a sacrifice I might make of an animal or something? Or is it a sacrifice that God makes when Jesus died on the cross?

That's the contrast in mind in the verses that follow. Two sorts of sacrifice. The sacrifice that a person might make offering an animal or the sacrifice that God makes in offering his son for us.

Now the readers as I've said are probably tempted to revert back to Jewish practices that even though they've heard the gospel of Jesus somehow they think they need to offer an animal sacrifice and abide by the Jewish food regulations and the strict laws of some of the Old Testament laws.

Now they're not necessarily bad in fact as we've seen through this letter the Old Testament rules and regulations are good but they're good because they point to what is better and Jesus is what is better.

[13 : 55] So verse 10 says we have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. The altar that we have is where Jesus was sacrificed the cross.

That's what he's got in mind here. We have the cross but those who revert back to Jewish sacrifices and offer them in the tent that is on earth animal sacrifices they've cut themselves off from the cross.

They think they're offering sacrifices for sin but they've ignored the real sin offering Jesus and so they do not benefit from the cross of Christ for the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

It's a way of talking about the sin offerings and the day of atonement offerings in the Old Testament. In the book of Leviticus those animals would be burned outside the camp. That's the Old Testament sacrifice and then he goes on to say in verse 12 therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate.

He died outside the walls of Jerusalem on a cross and he did that as a sacrifice he did that in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.

[15 : 06] Old Testament sacrifices don't sanctify anyone. We've seen that throughout this letter but the death of Jesus sanctifies makes holy sets apart for God makes us fit for a relationship with God.

Yes the Old Testament sacrifices were okay but the better one is Jesus' sacrifice and Jesus has fulfilled all those Old Testament ones. If you want to revert back to Judaism the writer is saying then you cut yourself off from the real altar the cross and you cut yourself off from the real sin offering Jesus' death and you cut yourself off from being sanctified by a sacrifice which is what Jesus' death and not animal sacrifices does for us.

Well if our heart is to be strengthened by grace as verse 9 said then it is to Jesus and the cross that we must go. If we are to persevere in faith then we need to be strengthened by grace for perseverance is what the writer is saying and if we are to be strengthened for perseverance by grace Jesus' death and his cross are where we go.

We never move on from that to a new and improved place to go. It is always back to the cross of Christ which is the demonstration of God's grace supreme above any other and that is where we must go time and time again to be strengthened by grace for perseverance in faith.

So often it seems to me that Christian churches are moving on from the cross and emphasising other things and in fact therefore are not being strengthened by grace sadly enough.

[16 : 50] And the perseverance that is in mind is a perseverance that will even cough abuse and ridicule persecution maybe even death for the sake of being Christian. We've seen that issue in the last few chapters in this letter to the Hebrews.

So we read in verse 13 let us then go to him Jesus outside the camp that is not just to Jesus as a nice person but to Jesus on the cross let us go to Jesus on the cross verse 13 is saying and bear the abuse he endured not be nailed to a cross like him but to associate ourselves with Jesus death for us.

That might mean that we caught ridicule but if we're to persevere through persecution then we need to be strengthened by grace and keep coming to the cross and be prepared to identify ourselves with that even if it isn't trendy in our world and even in our church sometimes but to do so knowing that such opposition and abuse is temporary because we are seeking a city that is to come as verse 14 says here we have no lasting city but we are looking for the city that is to come the glorious heavenly new Jerusalem as we saw in chapter 12 that's our destiny beyond any opposition or abuse or persecution beyond any strife or suffering or trouble or trial that we might face on earth all of that is put into perspective as our focus is on the heavenly city to come our ultimate and eternal destiny well perseverance is not an easy thing for Christians in our day and age it's easy to start well it's much harder to finish well the Christian life we're bombarded with reasons to give up the Christian faith in an increasingly secular and an increasingly hostile society in which we live it is harder to be Christian it is easier to give it up and if you're like me you probably know many people who maybe for many years were faithful

Christians but have given up the faith in early years in middle life or in old age perseverance comes from hearts strengthened by grace and that means going time and again to the sacrificial death of Jesus on a cross for us it is the same gospel that we read in the New Testament that was preached by the apostles Paul Peter the writer of this letter it is the same gospel for 2,000 years that we must hold fast to not go looking for a new gospel a better and improved gospel because any so called new teaching of Christianity diminishes Jesus and diminishes salvation therefore diminishing God and diminishing our hope as well apart from the fact that it's completely false and heretical it is the same gospel that we must cling to the same grace that we must cling to if we're to persevere in

Christian faith and in the end therefore the sacrifice that matters is not one that we might make but the sacrifice that God makes in Jesus' death for us however this passage does mention two sacrifices we're to make not in order to gain salvation but rather in response to God's sacrifice of Jesus Christ a sacrifice of praise in verse 15 and a sacrifice of good deeds in verse 16 firstly the sacrifice of praise verse 15 says through him Jesus then let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God that is the fruit of lips that confess his name a sacrifice of praise presupposes grace because if we're saved by something we do we won't praise God if we're saved by a combination of God and us we won't praise God if we think that we deserve to be saved we won't praise God it is only when we grasp grace that salvation is all

[21 : 06] God's work in Christ to which we contribute nothing and do not deserve it then and only then will we praise God as we ought because all the praise belongs to God and when we realise our spiritual bankruptcy when we realise that God's salvation to us is total and sufficient and yet nothing to do with us by way of our action then we'll praise God and yet so often it seems to me our Christian prayers are shopping lists of demands and requests and complaints to God bemoaning our life and our situation our lack of money or health or job or whatever it is it's all very well to pray those things but so often it's imbalanced it seems to me in modern Christianity whatever our circumstance whatever our situation however deprived or whatever sickness or suffering or inadequacy we might feel we might have firstly and foremostly we ought to be praising praising God for a salvation that he has given us that we don't deserve we don't contribute to it and nothing can take it away from us which has been the argument of this letter throughout praise must be on our lips all the time to God and if it's not then we've failed to grasp grace and so our hearts are not being strengthened and they're weak and we are very vulnerable not to persevere in faith to the end of our life notice that the sacrifice of praise of verse 15 is through

Jesus because it acknowledges that the grace of God is focused in Jesus Christ and his death for us see grace is not just a some sort of feeling grace is anchored in Jesus death on the cross for us that's the first sacrifice sacrifice of praise in response to the sacrifice of Jesus and the second sacrifice is verse 16 which says to us do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God not doing good in order to be saved and win God's favour but doing good in response to the grace of God to us because grace not only saves us it changes us grace perfects us grace for heaven and so if we've grasped grace and our hearts are being strengthened by grace then we'll find that we're being changed more into the likeness of Jesus more into likeness of love and generosity to sharing our things and doing good deeds that's the exhibition of grace in our life and that's the better way to live well finally the writer comes back to the issue of leaders in verse 17

I had thought of making a special sermon just on the first three words of verse 17 obey your leaders the writer is not saying blind obedience here to whoever is your vicar or pastor or minister of your church but rather obedience to your leaders who are godly in their teaching and in their example as well notice the task of Christian leaders or pastors they are to keep watch over your souls the language is the language used of shepherds keeping watch over a flock protecting providing the language used of a watchman in the Old Testament who guards the city gates and watches out for an approaching enemy in order to protect his people within the city so Christian leaders have a responsibility for watching over the souls of their people protecting them and feeding them by teaching what is true and guarding them against what is not that is the primary task of the Christian pastor the vicar the leader the minister that's the primary task is to guard or watch over the souls of the flock entrusted to them protecting them and feeding them so that they may be strengthened by grace to persevere in their lives to the end notice too the added responsibility for Christian leaders the middle of verse 17 says and they will give an account because on the final day of judgment each one of us will be called to account for our lives before God how we've lived what we've believed what we've done with our lives will be held to account before God but on that final judgment day for me for example as a

Christian leader I will also be held to account for you the flock entrusted of God entrusted to me for this time have I taught the faith have I modelled godly living have I encouraged grasping grace and persevering in faith to the end sadly there are people who give up the faith it's one of the causes of the greatest sadness I have in ministry but my task to which I'll be held accountable by God on that final day is have I protected and guarded and watched over your souls so that you may stand before God on that final day Christian leadership is not a light matter it is the most serious responsibility there is and that's why I think the writer goes on to say in verse 17 let your leaders do this with joy and not with sighing

I know from many of my colleagues in ministry how many of them exercise their ministry with sighing that is groaning that comes from suffering caused by their people not the suffering of their people being sick but the difficulties that Christians cause for ministers making their job hard and difficult and many times it seems to me acting abominably well thankfully that has hardly ever been my experience here and I pray it never is but your responsibility for whoever your Christian leader or pastor is or will be is to let them minister with joy so that they may faithfully watch over your souls this letter and this passage of this letter are urging us to persevere in Christian faith we do that when our hearts are strengthened by grace and grace is preeminently seen in the sacrifice of

[28 : 07] Jesus on the cross for us that's where we've got to go time and time again nowhere else but to the death of Jesus and for me as a minister accountable in many ways for your own spiritual life and perseverance the best thing I can do and the thing I must never stop doing is to preach the death of Jesus for us all that you may grasp grace have hearts that are strengthened persevere in faith to your life's end Amen name and