

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

The final admonitions of this letter are just as applicable to us as they were to the Hebrew Christians of the first century. First and foremost, "love of the brethren" should characterize our lives (13:1). That love is the defining mark of true believers. If we love Jesus, we will love His family, and it seems the author of Hebrews had in his mind Jesus' foretelling of the judgment of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25:31-46) as he wrote this final chapter.

He first mentions showing "hospitality to strangers" (13:2), reminiscent of Jesus' words to the sheep, "I was a stranger, and you invited Me in" (Matt. 25:35). He then mentions prisoners and the persecuted (the ill-treated), reminiscent of Jesus' words, "I was in prison, and you came to Me" (Matt. 25:36). Although many of us are not living in nations where Christians are being significantly persecuted or serving time in prison because of their faith, this does not mean that there is nothing we can do for persecuted and imprisoned Christians around the world. There are a number of excellent ministries that focus on serving the persecuted, such as Voice of the Martyrs, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, and Open Doors that can keep you informed of specific believers around the world who can use our prayers and to whom you can write to encourage. Heaven's Family also has a Persecuted Christians Fund which is used to meet the pressing needs of persecuted believers and their families.

The author mentions other "holiness essentials," reminding his readers (as Paul often did, which makes me suspect that he is the author) that God will judge fornicators and adulterers (13:4). He also warns against the love of money, often expressed by Paul using the words greed and covetousness, which he also frequently listed as sins that will keep one out of heaven. The author defines the love of money as "not being content with what you have," a heart attitude that would of course be manifested by actions. As long as we know that the Lord will never forsake us, we never need to fear suffering the lack of what we need (13:5-6).

Although the old covenant sacrificial system has been abolished, there are still sacrifices that new covenant believers can offer up to God. They are "sacrifices of praise" which the author says we should continually offer up (13:15). God is also pleased when we sacrifice our time, talents and treasures, "doing good and sharing" (13:16).

We are instructed to "obey [our] leaders and submit to them," but the author defines the kind of leaders who are worthy of such submission as being leaders "who keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account" (13:17). Genuine pastors are, above everything else, concerned for the spiritual health of their flocks. So they lead their sheep on the path of righteousness and make sure that they stay on that path, knowing that they themselves will give an account to the "great Shepherd" one day (13:20).

With this in mind, it is easy to see how far short so many fall who claim to be pastors, who in our age, very rarely even do so much as preach on biblical holiness, much less "keep watch over the souls" of anyone. It is also easy to see that it is only the pastor who oversees a small group who can possibly "keep watch over the souls" of his flock. A pastor must have a personal and close relationship with those in his flock if he is to know how they are living their lives. Discipleship is relational.

Although this letter has been packed with analogies drawn from the Old Testament, it seems the author couldn't resist sharing at least one more. Just as the bodies of the animals whose blood was brought into the holy place were burned outside the camp, so Jesus was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem (13:11-12). The Hebrew Christians should not think it strange that they were being ostracized from Jewish society, because Christ was also. They may not have been welcome in Jerusalem, but they were gaining an eternal city, the New Jerusalem (13:13-14).