

Sunday A.M.
May 14, 2006

The Supremacy of Christ Over All Things
Christian Leadership
Hebrews 13:7-9, 17-19

Text:

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.

¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

¹⁸Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. ¹⁹I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.

Introduction:

It is so easy to read a passage of Scripture without taking into consideration its context. It is easy to read a sentence in isolation from its context in the verses preceding and following it; but it is also easy to read verse isolated from its original context in history. Both of these have examples in our text this morning.

The most often quoted verse in Hebrews is likely to be v.8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” This verse is doing far more in its context than just giving us a doctrinal truism regarding the immutability of Christ. We’ll see that in a minute.

But also, when we come to a verse like v.17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them,” it is easy to divorce it from its originally intended purpose in being written to this church. It is easy for us to separate it out and turn it into a quick-fix sound bite during a heated business meeting, for instance. However, in my opinion, there is nothing in the text of Hebrews that implies this church was having a hard time submitting to its leaders. I think the passage has a different purpose all together.

This is the last message we will have in our series through Hebrews. We have taken these last sermons a bit out of order but I have already given you the flow of thought in previous sermons. But since this is the last time, let me summarize once more what is going on here in context.

As I have said all along in this series through Hebrews, the author of Hebrews is addressing a suffering church. And as you know, suffering can come from one of two directions: pleasure or pain. The preacher of Hebrews is preaching to those who, on the one hand, are contemplating *caving-in beneath the pressures that threaten* as well as to those who are contemplating *selling-out to pleasures that beckon*. (I hope by now those two sound-bites will be firmly entrenched in your brains.)

The message that both parties need is the same – it is the gospel of Christ’s supremacy over all things. To those suffering as Jews in a post-Jewish context, they needed to see the supremacy of Christ over the older covenantal system. He is the answer to all questions. He is the finish of all lines. He is the completion of all starts. He is the referent of all pointers. He is the substance behind all shadows. He is the antitype to all types. He is the end of the run, the final destination.

There remains nothing left to come. He is it. He is supreme. He, then, is worth suffering and even dying for. “Don’t cave-in! Persevere in faithfulness!” And since this Jesus is supreme, there is nothing this world has to offer that is more valuable. “Don’t sell-out! Persevere in faithfulness!”

The preacher has another dynamic going on throughout the sermon: he is addressing a suffering congregation. That is, he is addressing them in their corporate identity as a church. The author makes it clear throughout the sermon that each one’s perseverance is a corporate responsibility. Of course we know that famous section in 10:24-25? “And let us consider one another with a view to stirring up each one to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage each other...” (my translation). This is a church. Perseverance is a corporate responsibility. **The corporate gathering of God’s people is to be mutual and meaningful, as opposed to occasional and casual.**

Now, as he brings his sermon to a close he fires off these nine exhortations in vv.1-9 that I have divided into four categories. They are the categories of relationships, marriage and sexuality, money, and leadership.

As I have previously stated, I think there are two reasons these nine commands in four categories for living appear precisely here at the end of twelve chapters of Christ’s supremacy:

First, they stand-out as real expressions of heartfelt worship. We are meant to ask some hard and searching questions of our hearts:

- How can I manifest the supremacy of Christ over my relationships?
- How am I to worship the supremacy of Christ in marriage and sexuality?
- How do I demonstrate the supremacy of Christ over money?
- What will my commitment to Christ look like in my treatment of leadership?

Second, these categories stand-out as the areas in life where believers need to most help from the body. These are the areas we are most inclined to be blinded, deceived, hardened, and drifting. We are meant to ask some hard questions of each other:

- Do you ever feel pressures that threaten in areas of leadership, submission, marriage and other relationships?
- Do you ever feel pleasures that beckon in sex or money?

So to this end, I have been treating them topically. The command of Hebrews shouts forth: “Uphold the supremacy of Christ over all things!”

“How?”

And the answer we get this morning is: “by submitting to your leaders!”

Think about it. If this book has been written as a sermon to a suffering church urging them to hold on to their faith by looking to the supremacy of Christ above all things, then it means the sermon itself along with its preacher is a valuable tool to one’s perseverance.

We might say that the entire book stands as a representation of this one principle: **The Christian life is meant to be lived in the context of relationships**

- in relationship to a God through Christ –
- in relationship to a God – through a book –
- in relationship to a church with its teachers who teach the book –
- in relationship to a church with its people who live out the book in community.

All of this means that you and I cannot live the Christian life in isolation. We live connected to a body.

So the preacher is offering one last final illustration, and plea, for the means of help that has been offered to them. You need the help that comes to you through your spiritual leaders past and present.

Leadership Past

vv. 7-9 deal with leadership past:

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ⁹Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.

These verses speak of leaders who have already passed. Not only is speaking in past tense of these leaders but their way of life has a clearly visible outcome.

Notice several things about these words. First, do you see that their way of life has a visible outcome. That is to say, their lifestyle, their manner of living, powerfully portrays their faith. There is nothing about their life that clashes with their faith. That is remarkable. Do you have heroes whose life backs up and demonstrates their faith? I think this is a clear biblical mandate for heroes and biography.

But second, you will see that it is not their way of life that you are called to imitate but their faith. You can mimic someone's lifestyle and miss out on their faith. But you cannot mimic their faith and miss out.

John Piper is writing a series of short biographical sketches of his heroes called *The Swans Are Not Silent*. He has four volumes to it at present. Each volume contains the sketches of three individuals. I want to read you a portion of his introduction to the series.

[Book One, pp. 17-18]

But notice this: we are to remember the outcome of their way of life in such a way that we see Christ. We must ask ourselves if the way we see their life points to their faith in Christ. In seeing their faith we will see their Christ. Why must we see Christ in looking at their lives? Because the only constant throughout the ages is not the personality traits of world leaders; it's not the preaching skills of the gifted; it is not the mental heroics of the scholars; it is Christ. Do you see how he employs v. 8? Jesus Christ is the same yesterday (in the days of Paul in the 1st century, or of Augustine in the 4th century, or in the days of Calvin in the 16th century, or Spurgeon in the 19th century) and Jesus is the same today in the 21st century as he will be forever. We are to consider our leaders of the past in such a way that their lives strengthen our faith in the reliability of a changeless Christ.

And as we consider the faithfulness of Christ in past generations, we also see a strong unity of thought as the once delivered gospel through the pen of the apostles does not change. We soon realize that we stand on the shoulders of thousands of men who have gone before who will keep us steady on the pathway of truth. Look at v. 9, “Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings...” Considering our past leaders who taught us the word helps keep us on the straight and narrow.

Oh how I would love to rabbit trail and hobby horse here. Listen to me and hear me well. One of my biggest objections to the recent fad of church growth mega-churches is the race for something new and novel. When the church growth movement began touting the notion that doctrine doesn't matter – that doctrine divides, they stopped interacting with church history; they stopped quoting the Puritans and Reformers; they dropped creeds; they rejected the old hymns born out of theology (most of them). And is it any wonder, then, that so many of their new fangled ideas are simply ancient heresies re-hashed in modern clothing? Church, we cannot ignore church history. It may not be cool; it may not be palatable; but according to Hebrews 13:7-9, it is biblical! Considering the outcome of the lives of our forefathers who taught us the word of God steers us straight when we traverse the world of theology. That's one benefit.

Another benefit in considering the faith of our fathers is the way in which it strengthens our hearts in grace. Let me quote Piper again as he presents one of my favorite pastors of the past, Charles Simeon:

What I have found – and this is what I want to be true for you as well – is that in my pastoral disappointments and discouragements there is a great power for perseverance in keeping before me the life of a man who surmounted great obstacles in obedience to God's call by the power of God's grace. I need very much this inspiration from another age, because I know that I am, in great measure, a child of my times. And one of the pervasive marks of our times is emotional fragility. I feel it as though it hung in the air we breathe. We are easily hurt. We pout and mope easily. We break easily. Our marriages break easily. Our faith breaks easily. Our happiness breaks easily. And our commitment to the church breaks easily. We are easily disheartened, and it seems we have little capacity for surviving and thriving in the face of criticism and opposition.

A typical emotional response to trouble in the church is to think, "If that's the way they feel about me, then they can find themselves another pastor." We see very few models today whose lives spell out in flesh and blood the rugged words, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into various trials" (James 1:3). When historians list the character traits of the last third of twentieth century America, commitment, constancy, tenacity, endurance, patience, resolve and perseverance will not be on the list. The list will begin with an all-consuming interest in self-esteem. It will be followed by the subheadings of self-assertiveness, and self-enhancement, and self-realization. And if you think that you are not at all a child of your times just test yourself to see how you respond in the ministry when people reject your ideas.

We need help here. When you are surrounded by a society of emotionally fragile quitters, and when you see a good bit of this ethos in yourself, you need to spend time with people – whether dead or alive – whose lives prove there is another way to live. Scripture says, "Be imitators of those who through *faith* and *patience* inherit the promises" (Hebrews 6:12).

Charles Simeon is one such man who has given me help. Listen here:

The vicar of Trinity Church [England,] died in October, 1782, just as Charles Simeon was about to leave the university to live in his father's home. Simeon had often walked by the church, he tells us, and said to himself, "How should I rejoice if God were to give me that church, that I might preach the Gospel there and be a herald for Him in the University" (Moule, 37). His dream came true when Bishop Yorke appointed him "curate-in-charge" (being only ordained a deacon at the time)... He preached his first sermon there November 10, 1782.

But the parishioners did not want Simeon. They wanted the assistant curate Mr. Hammond. Simeon was willing to step out, but then the Bishop told him that even if he did decline the appointment he would not appoint Hammond. So Simeon stayed...

The first thing the congregation did in rebellion against Simeon was to refuse to let him be the Sunday afternoon lecturer... It was like a second Sunday service. For five years they assigned the lecture to Mr. Hammond. Then when he left, instead of turning it over to their pastor of five years they gave it to another independent man for seven more years! Finally, in 1794, Simeon was chosen lecturer. Imagine serving for 12 years a church who were so resistant to your leadership they would not let you preach Sunday evenings, but hired an assistant to keep you out.

Simeon tried to start a later Sunday evening service and many townspeople came. But the churchwardens locked the doors while the people stood waiting in the street. Once Simeon had the doors opened by a locksmith, but when it happened again he pulled back and dropped the service.

The second thing the church did was to lock the pew doors on Sunday mornings. The pewholders refused to come and refused to let others sit in their personal pews. Simeon set up seats in the aisles and nooks and corners at his own expense. But the churchwardens took them out and threw them in the churchyard. When he tried to visit from house to house, hardly a door would open to him. This situation lasted at least ten years. The records show that in 1792 Simeon got a legal decision that the pewholders could not lock their pews and stay away indefinitely. But he didn't use it. He let his steady, relentless ministry of the word and prayer and community witness gradually overcome the resistance.

You know, he stayed in that church for 49 years! Do you know what kind of counsel would be given to pastors today? You see, viewing the trials and struggles of yesterday can paint a different picture of today when you all you see is the faith of saints and the faithfulness of Christ. Mom's read biographies to your kids.