

3. Praying Together

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if we could turn to our Bibles on page 1009, we're continuing this series in Hebrews 13. It's a short passage today, verses 17 to 19, but I'm going to read verses 1 to 19 to put these verses in context.

So Hebrews 13, verse 1. Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

Remember those who are in prison as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have. For he has said, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. So we can confidently say, the Lord is my helper.

I will not fear. What can man do to me? Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

[1 : 1 8] Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Do 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.

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat, for the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the camp in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp, and bear the reproach he endured.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through Jesus, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.

That is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good, and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those will have to give an account.

[2 : 3 0] Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience desiring to act honorably in all things.

I urge you the more earnestly to do this, in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. This is the word of the Lord to us today, and may he bless it to us. Now, over these weeks, we have been looking at this chapter under the general heading, The Gospel Changes Everything.

Basically, when Christ comes into our lives, nothing is ever or can ever be the same. But we have particularly been concentrating, as the author concentrates, not just on individual lives being changed, but on Christian communities being formed.

And that's why it's so relevant to every one of us. Now, I don't know everybody here. In fact, some people here I don't know at all. But I would make bold to suggest that everybody here is in one of the following categories.

We either are a member of a Christian church, fairly satisfied with the church we are in, not complacent, but nevertheless, fairly involved, fairly diligent.

[3 : 54] Others, I suggest, are probably on the fringes of a Christian church, not very sure whether to become involved or how far to become involved. Others, perhaps, may have drifted away from the church and from the Christian community and be wanting to come back.

Others may be wondering whether this is the place for them at all, whether they actually want to be part of a Christian community. So you see, it's relevant to all of us, whether we are actively involved, whether we are marginally involved, whether we once were involved, or whether we are contemplating being involved.

This letter has a great message for us. This is a great book about God's covenant.

God makes a covenant with us. God sent Jesus, one with him, to become one of us, to die for us, and by his blood to make us his children. And now at the end of the letter he is saying that has certain consequences.

We have already looked at, first of all, living together as brothers and sisters. Last week we looked at believing together. What is it that Christians believe? And now we are going to look at praying together.

[5 : 09] Because this is one of the most important things about a Christian community, a group of Christians. I want to begin with a piece of doggerel. It's appalling poetry. And as a former English teacher it makes me shudder.

It says those like this. If everyone in my church were just like me, what kind of a church would my church be? Now as you can see that is pretty awful.

But the trouble is, I've heard people quoting that as if, although it's bad poetry, it were good theology. But it's pretty awful theology. It's pretty awful doctrine. It's pretty awful gospel as well.

Because why in the world would you or I or anyone else want everyone in our church to be just like me? I can imagine nothing more awful than to meet endless clones.

Not enough living with myself, far less meeting endless clones of myself. You see, the question we, the way we ought to be putting this is, if everyone in my church was just like Christ, what kind of a church would that be then?

[6 : 21] And that seems to me to be the emphasis of this chapter. Let me just remind you of the verse that was at the heart of last week's study, verse 8.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Because ultimately it is Jesus who makes Christian community. You see, we're not inviting you in these lunchtime services to join this church.

We're not inviting you to join any particular church. What we're asking is, do you know the Lord Jesus Christ? Is he your Savior and Lord? Does your life belong to him?

And obviously if that's the case, then you'll want to have fellowship with others of his family. So that's the first point I want to make. And that really connects with verse 17.

We look at verses 17 to 19. Obey your leaders. Now back in verse 7, he had said a similar thing. Remember your leaders.

[7 : 25] Now obviously those leaders were the founding leaders of this community of Christians or communities of Christians, probably in the city of Rome, who had now gone. Either they were dead or they had stepped down from active ministry.

But now he's talking about the present leaders. And once again, they are leaders because they follow the leader, Jesus Christ. And here it's especially the inner life of those leaders and the inner life of their flock.

So this is why I've called this section Praying Together. And there are two things I want to talk about. First of all, obeying in verse 17.

And then more specifically, praying in verses 18 and 19. Now, when the author says, obey, submit and pray, these are continuous words.

Keep on obeying. Keep on submitting. Keep on praying. This has been a great theme of the letter. Keep on. Go on with the faith. The Christian life is a marathon. It's not a sprint.

[8 : 34] Keep on going. Keep on persevering. Keep your eye to the winning post. Good leadership must be prayed for.

You see the connection between these two things. If we don't pray for our leaders, then they're not going to be the kind of people whom we'll find it possible to obey or to submit to very easily, will we?

But that's why the two things are connected. So what is the author telling us about those leaders and what we have to pray for? First of all, notice it's plural.

Obey your leaders. Leadership in the church must always be a plural leadership, must always be a team leadership. There is only one leader with a capital L, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

And it's his leadership that leaders in the church, in any church, can only represent and can only point to.

[9 : 36] No one person can be in total charge because of human weakness. That's the problem in countries, isn't it? When you get a tyrannical leader who refuses to submit himself to election, who refuses to have any rivals or any opposition, then you have tyranny because no one human being can be trusted with that kind of power.

All power corrupts. As it was said, and all power corrupts absolutely. So pray for your leaders, he says. But that doesn't mean a church is a democracy either.

It doesn't mean we don't improve the leadership of a church if we say, oh, one person can be leader, therefore we're all leaders. That's just a kind of anarchy.

And that's why he says submit to them. Keep on submitting to them. What does it mean to submit to our leaders? What are we what are we signing up to, so to speak, when we when we take this seriously?

What those of you who were here last week will remember that we saw where the authority of the leaders lay. The authority of the leader lay in the word of God.

[10 : 51] Verse 7. Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. And as leaders speak the word of God pointing to the unchanging Christ who is relevant in every generation and every new situation.

That is where the submission comes. We're not submitting to individuals themselves. We're submitting to their authority as they bring to us the word of God. And that is the authority of the Christian leader.

Now all Christian churches have their own methods of appointing leaders. Some of them may be better than others. That's not my concern at the moment. Not going to go down that road. But what I am going to say is no Christian leader is a true leader unless they speak the word of the Lord.

That is the sign of a true leader. Somebody who guides, somebody who teaches, somebody who instructs, somebody who guards by the word of God. And if they faithfully preach that word, then they are leaders.

And the third thing there is keeping watch over your souls. They are guardians of the flock. A true leader will feed the people. A true shepherd.

[11 : 59] That's what shepherd, pastor means. Somebody who feeds the flock. But the hired hand will feed the flock as well if the pay is good enough. But a true leader will not only feed the sheep.

The true leader will guard the sheep against the wolf. The true leader will fight the wolf as well as feed the sheep. Now you can see how all this links up with prayer.

If a true leader, an ordinary, sinful, fallible human being like the rest of us, is going to take on this awesome responsibility of preaching, of leading, of teaching, of guarding, then they need to be prayed for.

They need the prayers, they need the support, other support as well of course. It's actually, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, it's actually awfully easy to say to somebody, I'll pray for you.

Because then that transfers the responsibility to them and God. And we don't have to do anything to help. Now that's very true. Very often, very often, we should be helping when we say, I'll pray for you.

[13 : 05] And by the way, I've come to learn over the years to use that phrase much more sparingly than I used to do. Because so often I forget. So often I say glibly to somebody, I'll pray for you.

Then months later I remember the person and say, nearly me, I did not keep that promise, did I? So, praying is vital. Praying, but praying, must also be accompanied by other support.

That brings us on then to the second part, pray for us. We need to be diligent in prayer because once again it's a continuous word, keep on praying for us.

When a former Prime Minister of Great Britain in the early years of the 20th century, Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister, people congratulated him and he said, I don't need your congratulations, I need your prayers.

Now that's terribly important. important. But what kind of prayer are the leaders needing? Verses 18 and 19 are very interesting in this respect because the author says, pray for us, plural, identifying himself with these leaders and then I urge you, singular, to do this in order that I may be restored to you.

[14 : 27] We don't know, as I said, who the author was but clearly he is somebody who is associated with the leaders of this church. What are we to pray for?

We have a clear conscience. Now a clear conscience doesn't mean that we are sinless. It means that we act honorably and with integrity, showing high standards.

Many people talk about leaders, about ministers, about other leaders in the church, as if there ought to be a higher standard for them. Now that's dangerous for two reasons.

First of all, it elevates leaders onto a pedestal that no human being deserves to be elevated onto. It has to be said, evangelical churches have bought into the celebrity culture of the age in a big way and with very unfortunate and indeed sometimes disastrous results because nobody, nobody can stand being up there on that kind of pedestal.

But secondly, it allows other people who don't regard themselves as leaders to think there's a lower standard is required for them. The point the Bible consistently makes, the letter of James makes this very powerfully, is that those who lead, those who teach, what James says will be judged with greater strictness, doesn't say will be judged by a different standard.

[15 : 54] It says will be judged by the same standard. But they'll be especially responsible because part of the leader's duty is to model Christ.

Paul says, be imitators of me as I am of Christ. And remember, Paul's a pioneer missionary going into totally pagan cultures. And therefore, he and his associates, he and the other leaders, had to model what it was like to be a Christian.

The world we live in is becoming increasingly like the world of the first century. A pagan world. A world where people don't have the elements, the rudiments of Christianity.

And therefore, one of the tasks of leaders, and indeed the whole Christian community, is to model godly living. And that's what our author is saying. Pray for this. Pray that your leaders will be the kind of people whom people will look at and say, yes, they're not perfect.

They've got their faults. But, this is the kind of leader that I can respect. This is the kind of community I would like to belong to. That's what our author is saying.

[17 : 02] How's that going to happen? It's only going to happen if we pray for it, isn't it? It's not going to happen automatically. It's not going to happen if we sit down and say, oh, I'm going to grit my teeth, I'm going to stiffen my upper lip, and I'm going to do it by my own efforts.

It won't happen that way. So, we pray that leaders will be good models, that they will point to the good shepherd, that the shepherds will show what it is like to be cared for, to be guarded, to be fed, and to be protected by the good shepherd.

But, verse 19 is important as well, where the author changes to the singular, or they may be restored to you the sooner. Now, we don't know who he was, and it may be that he came from the same circles as Paul.

We'll see next week that he talks about our brother Timothy, who of course is one of Paul's associates. But the important thing is this. This writer is speaking with an authority that doesn't admit of any questioning.

Now, let me explain what I mean by that. I said that the mark of a true leader is to be one who preaches the word of God faithfully, lives it insofar as they are able.

[18 : 24] That's what they need to be prayed for. But this author is speaking with an authority that's greater than that of a leader. This author is speaking with the authority of someone who is writing scripture.

I think that's so important. We must see this always in scripture. The prophets, the Old Testament authors, the apostles, the New Testament authors, they never give their work for discussion.

They give it for obedience. A few weeks ago, Edward Lobb led us through 1 Thessalonians. There's a fascinating little insight into that in chapter 5.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, test prophecies, don't quench the Spirit. In other words, when people claim to be speaking in the word of the Lord, test what they're saying.

Make sure they're getting it right. But then he goes on to say, read this letter in the churches. He doesn't say read it and discuss whether Paul got it right, because Paul realizes he's writing scripture.

[19 : 24] And so is the author of Hebrews here. The author of Hebrews is not simply giving advice, he is giving us holy scripture. This is part of the canon part of what has to be obeyed.

So you see what this little section is saying. This little section is saying, first of all, we need leaders. But we need godly leaders who model the good shepherd and who preach the word which was embodied in that shepherd, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

We need to pray collectively and individually for such leaders, both that the present, both that such leaders like that will be supported, and that more of them will be raised up.

And the reason we need to do this is because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. His truth which doesn't change is this great letter to the Hebrews which the author is almost at the end of now.

This becomes part of what he's saying. Not just to the Hebrew Christians but to us. As we finish, we need to pray for each other.

[20 : 34] We're living in a tough, difficult world. We need to pray that we'll all be able to keep on going. But we need especially to pray for our leaders that their work may be with joy and not with groaning.

In other words, don't add to their burdens, so to speak. We need to read the scripture if we're going to pray properly. So I finish with what I said at the beginning.

If everyone in my church was just like Christ, that would be wonderful, wouldn't it? Amen. Let's pray.

Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever. Father, we pray for the leaders of the church and the churches. we pray for those who faithfully proclaim the word of God, for those who translate it, for those who teach it, for those who write books and use other means of communication to bring that gospel into the public arena.

Help each of us, Father, whether we really belong in your family or whether we are simply seeking. We pray for this word from Hebrews.

[21 : 53] will lead us to the feet of the good shepherd and lead us to become members of his flock. Amen.