

Living in the Family of God

In the name of the mediator of the new covenant, whose blood speaks a better word than that of Abel, dear friends in Christ: The Book of Hebrews, from which our Epistle lessons have been coming for the last several weeks, is believed to be an extended sermon rather a letter to one of the first century churches as are most of the books of the New Testament. It's a sermon directed especially to those who had been practicing the Jewish faith according to the old covenant, the one the Lord handed down to Moses at Mount Sinai, what with all its rules, regulations, and sacrifices for sin, and who have now come to faith in Christ Jesus who is the fulfillment of all of those things. His life given on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice for sin, the only one that really mattered. The preacher of Hebrews systematically demonstrates how the new covenant of God's grace in Christ is infinitely superior to the old covenant under the Law of Moses. His main purpose is to impress upon his hearers the need to push forward into this new covenant and not give into the temptation to turn back to familiar old ways. He knows that we humans are creatures of habit and how hard it is to escape the gravitational pull of tradition and ingrained practice.

His argument for moving forward comes to is crescendo in what is called the great chapter on faith, Hebrews 11, in which he gives a run down on the saints of old: Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua to name but a few – people who lived by faith in the Word and promises of God, people who faced incredible hardships and persecution, people who by faith accomplished great things for the Lord, people who through their stories recorded for us in sacred Scripture still bear witness to us of God's faithfulness. He fulfilled his plans and purposes for them and brought them safely through to glory, and he is doing the same for you – you who through faith in Jesus the Savior he has made his child and heir.

All of that brings us to the text we heard today in which the preacher of Hebrews begins to make some practical applications. Now that we are in this new covenant of God's grace in Christ Jesus, how do we live in it? What are the rules of the house, so to speak, in the family of God?

He begins with our ongoing need to resist temptation. Christ died to free us from sin, not to free us in order *to* sin. This is a danger: thinking that because the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross atones for all sin, that sin doesn't matter any more. Go ahead. Do it. You're forgiven. No. Sin is the problem. It hurts people. If you do it, it hurts you too. Its end is death. We should hate even the thought of it, which is why he says, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." The point is that's how far you should be willing to go, as if someone were holding a knife to your throat saying unless you commit this sin I'm going to slice you. But no, you give in too easily. You do it willingly, without outside pressure. As the Lord's redeemed children we need to put up a better fight against temptation. We ought to pursue holiness, Christian virtue, and the gifts of the Spirit that proclaim we are the children God has called us to be.

The preacher of Hebrews next moves on to what our attitude about discipline should be. And it should be noted that the word he uses for discipline has to do with the training of a child. We can think of this discipline in two ways. One is corrective discipline to rein in and prevent future episodes of bad behavior. Yes, I'm talking about spankings – or whatever form of non-

corporeal punishment a parent might apply to a wayward child. Sometimes we need that. And the Lord in his wisdom applies it. But most discipline a child undergoes is positive, like learning the multiplication table, how to sound out words, or how to play a musical instrument. You have to drill and practice and keep at it. And no, it's not a lot of fun; but it produces the desired result. You become a better person by it.

The preacher of Hebrews says that the Lord uses life's hardships to discipline us. He makes us better people through the things we suffer. For example, we learn to be generous by suffering through times of need. We learn to be sympathetic by experiencing sorrow and loss. We can only learn to forgive by being sinned against. You get the idea. So rather than complain and imagine that God hates you because some tragedy has come into your life, you should see it as proof of his loving care. Parents discipline their children because they love them and they want them to grow up right. And human parents can make mistakes. But God can't. He disciplines us for our good. And he knows what he's doing. It goes with his being omniscient.

Moving on, the preacher next admonishes us to "Strive for peace with everyone". That is to say if it's within your control and not forcing you to violate your conscience, then get along with people. Put up with their irritating habits. Forgive them when they sin. Don't insult or provoke them. Play nice. Share. Be kind. Be gentle. And no, it's not always possible. There's little you can do with someone who has made up their mind to hate you. They refuse to bury the hatchet. But you bury yours. If there's a problem or conflict with someone, let it be on their side, not yours.

Next, we are to pursue holiness – but I already covered that when speaking about resisting temptation. So I'll move onto the preacher's next item which is the danger of failing to obtain the grace of God. By this he means live in the Gospel. Understand who you are: a sinner deserving of God's wrath and condemnation and yet received by him as a dearly loved child for the sake of Christ. Let that simple truth shape your thinking about all that happens.

We are next warned against allowing what the preacher calls a "root of bitterness" to spring up among us. The thing about roots is that they grow underground and out of sight. And so is much of the conflict that takes place within churches. People are all smiles and friendly to each other's faces, and then they go home and complain bitterly to those close to them about what so and so said or did to offend them. These things spread underground like the mint in my garden. You plant it here. You try to contain it. And yet it manages to send tendrils out so that you've got mint popping up twenty feet away. Don't let it happen. Nip it in the bud. You got a problem with someone? Deal with it face to face, openly, honestly – not backhanded, backstabbing, and underground. That's how minor problems become major explosions, and as the preacher says, "defile many".

No list of warnings would be complete without mentioning sexual immorality, which is what's next on the preacher's list. And here I think the admonition of St. Paul is most appropriate. There is a tendency to think "what's the harm?" if I do this or think that or look at this website. Who does it hurt? Paul tells us that all other sins are committed outside the body, but the person who sins sexually sins against his own body. It's a form of self-destruction. And it violates the Lord's good design for what marriage and family life should be. Thus it undermines what is the basic building block of all of human society. As the Lord's children we should be keeping ourselves chaste and upholding his good design.

And lastly we are warned against being ungodly like Esau who for a single meal traded away and lost his valuable birthright. You remember the story: Esau went hunting (it was his

thing) and came back empty handed. He's ravenously hungry. Here sits his younger brother Jacob cooking up a pot of red lentil stew. It smells wonderful. Esau says, "Serve me up some of that". Jacob replies, "What'll you give me? Oh, I know: how about your birthright – the extra share of our father's estate that you're entitled to as the firstborn." Esau says, "I'm starving to death. What good is my birthright if I'm dead? You got yourself a deal." Through his shortsightedness and lack of self-control Esau acted like a fool.

What's the point? In Christ, you've been given a great birthright. You're a child of God and an heir of his kingdom. And you can trade it all away for the fleeting pleasures of sin – any sin – in this life. Don't make that mistake. Cling to what is yours. Cling to the Savior through whom you have it.

For, as the preacher tells us, returning to his original theme of the superiority of the new covenant, you've not come to physical Mount Sinai, where the Lord came down in terrifying fire and smoke causing even Moses to tremble in fear. No, you've come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem – where innumerable saints and angels rejoice in festal gathering – and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, whose blood speaks a better word than that of Abel. Recall that Abel's blood cried to the Lord from the ground for justice. Avenge my death! Jesus' blood cries from the cross for forgiveness, grace, and mercy. Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.

Since through Christ we've come into this new covenant, let us live in it as redeemed children of the family of God. Let's make our Father proud of what he's made us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!