

Faith Reformed Church
Stevensville, Ontario
May 3, 2009
Morning Service

Text: Hebrews 13:20-25
Sermon: A Parting Benediction

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.

Today brings our study of the Letter to the Hebrews to a close. We began it on the first Sunday in January in 2008. That was 59 sermons ago. I have found the preparation of these sermons to be a wonderful blessing, for Hebrews is a letter filled with Jesus Christ. He is continually exalted as the One who is supreme over all others. He is lifted up time and again as the One Mediator in whom alone peace with God is to be found. He is shown to be the Great High Priest whose offering alone can cleanse from sin. He is glorified as the One in whom we must constantly abide if we are to have life and have it to the full. The lesson this morning continues the pattern; it exalts and lifts up on high the name of Jesus. Before we get to the lesson itself, however, let me give you a brief recap of Hebrews 13 in which our author essentially summarizes everything he has been saying throughout the Letter.

In summing up his message as his letter winds down to a close, our author has been describing the Christian life. He has pointed out four things. First, he has pointed out the characteristics of the Christian life. If you were to ask, “What is a Christian life supposed to look like?” the answer he would give you is this: A Christian life is one of love and holiness combined.

Holiness gives direction to love; love gives warmth to holiness. A Christian strives to live a life of holy love and loving holiness.

Second, he has pointed out the catechism of the Christian; that is to say, he has lifted up the teaching and the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Our author tells us that just as Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever so is the gospel he brings. The gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in the atoning sacrifice of Christ alone, and all to the glory of God alone is unchanging. It is now what it always has been and always will be. Jesus' teachings are true, unchanging and authoritative; they are to be believed and lived out.

Third, he has described the conduct of the Christian. A Christian is a person who strives to make his whole life an act of worship by making it an offering to the Lord. Before speaking he asks, "Is what I am going to say for the glory of God? Will it bless his people and extend his kingdom or will it be hurtful and a hindrance. He asks the same sort question before acting. "Is what I am about to do pleasing to God; will it be for glory or for shame? Can I dedicate this action to the Lord and to his purposes?"

Fourth, he has described the context of the Christian. A Christian does not live alone, but lives his life in the context of a congregation. As part of

that body he submits himself to the authority of the leaders God has furnished for the guidance of the flock. He promises obedience to their godly leadership and willingly submits himself to the words of grace and admonition they bring.

All of those things are, of course, beyond the capability of any man. We have no native power to live in godliness and righteousness. If left to ourselves we would easily become distracted from sound teaching and wander in the pathways of error. Who is strong enough to dedicate his life entirely to God? The natural man strives to reserve some portion of his life to himself. It says, “You can have me, God, but not all of me. I want some part of my life to remain mine and mine alone.” As Paul asked, in a rhetorical manner, “Who is sufficient for these things” (II Corinthians 2:16)? That is why our author solicited the prayers of the Hebrew congregation in our lesson last week. He wrote, “Pray for us” (18a). He knew full well that without the power of the Holy Spirit at work in his heart he knew he could never even aspire to the Christian life he was called to. That’s why in our lesson today he returns the favour and lifts up a prayer on behalf of the congregation.

His prayer is a benediction. “Benediction” means, “good word.” All New Testament letters end with a benediction, some more elaborate than others. A benediction is a prayer to God on behalf of others—in this case on behalf of the readers of his letter. This benediction is, in some way, a culmination of the whole letter. Think of it this way. He has been exhorting his readers to do God’s will by showing the characteristics of a Christian through a loving and holy walk. He has urged them to hold fast to their catechism—to the good deposit—the gospel that has once and for all been delivered to the saints. He has exhorted them to conduct themselves as befits those who bear the name of Christ by offering up their whole lives to God as a sacrifice of worship, thanksgiving and praise and he has urged them to live in their congregation with submissive hearts and a spirit of obedience and cooperation. He wants them to respond to his charge with faithfulness and tenacity in the midst of a situation of rising peril and persecution. He wants them to hold on to Christ for all they are worth so that they will be blessed and so that others will be blessed through their witness. But note this: He doesn’t appeal to his congregation to do all these things. He knows they don’t have the spiritual strength. They are not up to the job. But our author knows that God is up to the task, and so it is to God that our author appeals. He asks God to work in the people of his

congregation, giving them whatever they need to live a life that is pleasing in God's sight.

Let me be clear. What is it that allows people to live lives pleasing to God? What is it that moves people from doing their own wills to doing God's will? What is it that stops us from using or exploiting people? What motivates us to love as God commands and to serve with true good will? What is it that moves us from mere good intentions to actual good works and causes us to hunger and thirst for true righteousness to guide our decisions? What brings this about is the Holy Spirit alive in our hearts. It is not a matter of human effort; we cannot live in this way in our own power. Zechariah 4:6 puts it this way: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord." When we come to the Gospel of John we will learn that children of God are "born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (1:13). That is to say, apart from the grace of God in the sending of the Holy Spirit to take up residence in us, our hearts will remain self-serving, self-deceiving and, ultimately, self-destroying. And so it is that our author offers up a prayer, a benediction, a good word for his congregation.

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. AMEN.

Let's take the elements of this benediction one at a time. It starts off, "May the God of peace." Our God is a God of peace. He is at peace with himself, for he is perfect and complete. There is nothing missing in him; there is nothing he lacks; there is nothing he needs. He is perfectly content. He has peace. But not only does he have peace, he bestows peace. He gives peace as a gift to those who do not have it. And note this: He bestows the gift of peace on those who are still sinners. This is what Paul writes in Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us." While we were still sinners God reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ. He declared the war was over. He declared that because of what Christ had done, we were no longer enemies. Look. The gospel is not, "Do God's will—work hard to make yourself acceptable—and you will find peace with him." It works the other way. God first gives the gift of peace through His Son—and out of this gift comes every good thing needed for the doing of his will.

He gives this gift of peace "through the blood of the eternal covenant [that] brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus." A covenant is a binding

agreement that provides the terms which bring two parties together in a relationship. There are business covenants. There are marriage covenants. And there is an eternal covenant. The eternal covenant is sometimes called the “Covenant of Redemption.” Sometimes it is called the “Counsel of Peace.” As an eternal covenant that are aspects of the covenant that go back before the creation of the universe and aspects that reach out into the eternity that is to come. Let’s start in eternity past. Before the creation God the Father laid a charge of Jesus which he accepted voluntarily, a charge that came with promises that would be bestowed upon completion of the undertaking. Here are the conditions of the covenant:

1. Jesus would take on human flesh, being born of a woman, born under the Law.
2. He would fulfill the whole of the Law on behalf of his elect people, achieving a full righteousness for them where Adam had failed.
3. He would receive in their place the punishment his people had deserved by their sins, shedding his own blood for them on the cross.

In return, God promised Jesus that when his work was done,

1. all of the elect would be saved. They would be adopted into the family of God as his brothers and sisters and
2. he would receive dominion over all things through his resurrection from the grave.

John Flavel, an English Puritan who became a pastor in 1650 preached a sermon in which he imagined the conversation between the Father and the Son that took place before worlds were called into existence.

The Father says of us, “My Son, here is a company of poor, miserable souls that have utterly undone themselves and now lie open to my justice! Justice demands satisfaction for them or will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them: What shall be done for these souls?”

Christ replies, “O my Father, such is my love to, and pity for them that rather than they shall perish eternally I will be responsible for them as their Surety; bring in all your bills that I may see what I owe you. Father, bring them all in that there may be no after-reckonings with them; at my hand shall you require it. I will rather choose to suffer your wrath than that they should suffer it; upon me, my Father, upon me be all the debt.”

“But my Son,” God says, “if you undertake for them you must reckon to pay the last mite; expect no abatements; if I spare them I will not spare you.”

And Christ replied, “Content, Father; let it be so; charge it all upon me. I am able to discharge it: and though it prove a kind of undoing to me, though it impoverishes all my riches, empty all my treasures...yet I am content to undertake it.”

Think of the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty might become rich.”

The Covenant of Redemption—the covenant that brought us peace—is a covenant sealed in blood. It is accomplished through the shedding of Christ’s blood. You can think of it this way: Hebrews as a whole is a book soaked in the blood of Christ. Jesus appears in the Letter as the spotless

Lamb, perfect and unblemished and suitable as an atoning sacrifice.

Hebrews insists that Jesus does not save us by setting a moral example, or by bringing us enlightenment or by offering us his teachings or by starting a new political system. He saves us by going outside the camp, by bearing disgrace and by shedding his blood to make his people holy (13:12). It is only through his blood—his death at Calvary—that salvation can come. It makes me think of something John MacArthur said in a Christmas sermon some years ago:

Here is a side to the Christmas story that isn't often told: those soft little hands, fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, were made so that nails might be driven through them. Those baby feet, pink and unable to walk, would one day walk up a dusty hill to be nailed to a cross. That sweet infant's head with sparkling eyes and eager mouth was formed so that someday men might force a crown of thorns onto it. That tender body, warm and soft, wrapped in swaddling clothes, would one day be ripped open by a spear. Jesus was born to die.

The shed blood of Christ makes three statements. The first is this: God judges sin. It is only through the blood of Christ that we see the exceeding sinfulness of sin. J. C. Ryle put it this way:

Terribly black must that guilt be for which nothing but the blood of the Son of God could make satisfaction. Heavy must that weight of human sin be which made Jesus groan and sweat drops of blood in agony at Gethsemane and cry at Golgotha, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Second, the blood of Christ shows the magnitude of the love of God for his own. J. I. Packer wrote this:

The measure of love is how much it gives and the measure of the love of God is the gift of His only Son to be made man, to die for our sins and so become the one Mediator who can bring us to God. The cross of Christ is the crowing proof of the reality and boundlessness of God's love.

And third, through his shed blood the Lord Christ says, "I am not aloof. I am a friend who sticks closer than a brother. I have entered into your world. I have suffered and spilled my blood on your account. In all your afflictions I have been afflicted. And I have come close in order to bless you and to bring you peace. In a world of persecution and trouble, of sickness and death, you can know that you are held in the everlasting arms and that through my blood you will know a resurrection to everlasting life. So lift up your hearts and walk in trust. Remember the words of Paul:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (II Corinthians 4:8-18)

And so it is, through a covenant established before the foundation of the world, through which Christ promised to live in perfect righteousness and suffer and die on behalf of all the Father would give him, Jesus became our Great Shepherd. As our Shepherd he is our guide and instructor. He governs, guards and defends his flock. And he equips his own “with everything good for doing his will.” The word translated “equip” means “to set to right what is out of order.” We have here a prayer that God would make his people fit to do good works. Their sin had rendered them incapable of doing what was pleasing in God’s sight. They were out of order. Broken. They didn’t work. They were of no use because of their natural born enmity against God. But all that is now over through the grace of God in sending his Son for their redemption and the sending of the Holy Spirit into their hearts for their sanctification—to give them power to live in a new way.

Now let me make it clear: God’s working in us in this way does not make us passive. We do not sit back and say, “It is God and work in me so I am going to be at ease in Zion and become a spiritual couch potato.” Not at all; in fact, it is quite the opposite. Because of his working in us, changing our hearts, changing our motivations, changing our desires and longings so that they are vitally concerned with godliness and righteousness, we are

moved from the inside out to pursue God's purposes and God's pleasure with renewed strength and vigour. We read the Bible with new eyes. We see ourselves with a deep humility. We see others with deeper understanding and sympathy. We love Jesus more deeply and our greatest desire becomes to see his name hallowed and our greatest joy to see his will being done.

Let me add one last word. The Spirit-wrought changes that take place in our lives that enable us to bear good fruit to the glory of God are only a preparation for much greater things to come. In this life we struggle to please God and all too often we fail. We backslide. We lose our way. We forget the comfort that is so close to us. The closer we come to the Lord, the more obvious our failings become. The nearer we get to the Lord, the deeper our need is seen to be. But one day that will come to an end. When Jesus died he took away the penalty of sin. When he sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts he broke the power of sin. One glad morning we will stand before him transformed and on that day we will find that even the presence of sin has been taken away and we will serve the Lord perfectly. Paul put it this way in I Corinthians 2:9:

No eye has seen,
No ear has heard,
No mind has conceived
What God has prepared
For those who love him.

Beloved, do not neglect so great a salvation. Instead commit yourself, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, to make your life an offering of praise and thanksgiving. In everything you think and say and do, let this message sound out loud and clear:

Amen!
Praise and glory
And wisdom and thanks and honour
And power and strength
Be to our God forever and ever.
AMEN!

Revelation 7:12

In Christ's name. AMEN.