

# The Ethics of Christ's Unshakeable Kingdom

## Readings

Proverbs 16.18-20

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13.1-8

Luke 14.1, 7-14

## Opening

This morning we conclude our miniseries on the Letter to the Hebrews. For the past six weeks we've been meditating from Hebrews and Colossians on what it means to be the Church. Our age speaks a great deal on the subjects of identity and belonging. So we need to bear witness that the greatest foundation of our identity and belonging is Jesus Christ and his Church.

There's no better way to explore these questions than to read the thoughts, the questions, the difficulties of the earliest churches. They were wrestling with real issues as a Church in light of Jesus' death, resurrection, and promised return. How does the Gospel of Jesus change the way we see the world and live in the world?

So we conclude this brief series in Colossians and Hebrews for the time being, returning next week and the month of September to the Gospel of Luke among other lectionary readings. But when the calendar turns to October, we'll come back to the Epistles, devoting a month of Sundays to Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. We'll resume this meditation of what it means to be the Church in a different way. We'll consider how Paul hands on the faith and seeks to finish well in the Lord. So I hope that gives you some orientation about where we're headed on Sundays.

## Fitting Hebrews 12 with Chapter 13

For today's purpose, let's return to Hebrews 13 in your pew Bible on page 1009. We come to a new chapter, the final chapter, in this letter, yet we need to remember that New Testament books were not divided into chapter and verse by the original authors. That came later. Original readers and hearers of these books would hear the writings in their *wholeness*. We are more accustomed to these smaller divisions which helps us meditate more deeply on a passage, but we often lose connections to the greater topic at hand in the book. Today's reading is a perfect example of hearing a passage in light of what comes before.

The writer of Hebrews spoke about coming to Mt Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, *in this life*, declaring this mysterious Presence and Reality that we are surrounded by angels and archangels and the company of heaven. He gives us roots in the heavenly Mt Zion in this world, then speaks of Jesus' unshakeable kingdom; that God deserves our awe-filled and reverent worship and he is a consuming fire. Then the very next statement is 'Let brotherly continue,' followed by practical instructions on practical, ethical topics.

This feels like a jarring, sudden change in the discussion. It's what we call an 'illegal segue' in my family. My family came in town this weekend to celebrate my mother's birthday. Dinner conversations are loud and lively in our family, and not for the timid. If you're speaking but make a radical shift in the discussion, someone will reach for their napkin like a football referee reaches for a penalty flag, float it in on the table, whistling you for an 'illegal segue.'

This *feels* like an illegal segue from Hebrews 12-13. We've been reading about our ancestors in faith, the great cloud of witnesses, the heavenly Mt Zion, then we hear this quick series of commands regarding life together—brotherly love, hospitality, prisoners, marriage, money, leaders. How does the majestic vision of Hebrews 12 fit with the practical commands of Hebrews 13?

I think it fits in this way. The writer gives us deep roots in the heavenly Mt Zion, speaks of belonging to the Lord's unshakeable kingdom, and foretells how the Lord will shake heaven and earth once again. These are not empty moral instructions—they are rooted in a story:

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. These habits and virtues are the root system of Christ's unshakeable kingdom. I think the commands of Hebrews 13 reveal *how* we stay rooted in the Lord's unshakeable kingdom..

It is true that we live in an increasingly secular age, an era when many Christian virtues we uphold are questioned, doubted, or rejected in wider society. In a time of skepticism and even hostility to Christian moral convictions, I think orthodox Christians have fallen short in our own witness. The world hears our moral stances on issues, but we haven't given the deep reasons why—the grand story of Israel and Jesus Christ. We've spoken about 'traditional values' more than the Kingdom of God; we've given a call to holiness without the story that Christ Jesus died; he rose again; and he's coming again. The writer of the Hebrews doesn't give moral commands without anchors in the story of God and the kingdom of God. We must follow the ancient way in our witness today. Tell the story of Israel and Jesus Christ, describe the Kingdom of God, and all the sudden our moral convictions take on a much greater depth and beauty.

## Section 2: Hospitality

I wish that I had time to explore each of the virtues described here, but I'm going to limit myself to three: hospitality, marriage, and freedom from money. The first virtue of hospitality must be heard, not only in light of the greater story of God, but in light of verse 1: 'Let brotherly love continue.' Both verses 1 and 2 are spoken in the imperative case—these are commands. The kinship, care, and love *within* the Church must continue, yet it has an outward orientation to strangers.

In this single verse, we discover two distinctly Christian convictions about hospitality. One, hospitality involves outsiders, and two, hospitality carries a great mystery. The Greek word for hospitality is a compound word in the original language—*philoxenia*. 'Philo' means love of brother (see v. 1) and 'xenia' is the word for stranger. Combine them and you have a verb meaning 'to love the stranger' or outsider. So, verses 1-2 would read 'Let *philadelphia* continue. Do not neglect *philoxenia*.' Both are commands to love, both are verbs—concrete actions, not abstract ideas.

In other words, to offer real hospitality in the early Church *required* an outsider. Now, much of that ancient practice of hospitality was cultural in the Middle East, but in Israel it took on a much greater mystery. Why? Because of Abraham and Sarah, a story that the writer of Hebrews already invoked in chapter 11. When Abram was dwelling near the oaks of Mamre, he was greeted by the Lord God, appearing in the form of three mysterious visitors. Abram and Sarai offer them food and hospitality and receive the mysterious prophecy that Sarai will bear a son of promise. The writer of Hebrews has *at least* this story in mind when he says 'some have entertained angels unaware' and maybe even more recent examples in their midst. Hospitality always involves outsiders *and* it holds the potential for the Lord's mysterious presence to break out.

In our church, we're seeking to create spaces throughout Knoxville where we can share food and prayer together in Table Groups. Yet I pray that we will find ways to invite friends who don't attend our church to these neighborhood tables. This is the essence of Christian hospitality—not just for us, but for those not present in the Church. Not only with Abraham, but Jesus revealed the mystery of hospitality in Matthew 25, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Philoxenia, hospitality, means a real, active love of the outsider. That's our story; that is life in the Kingdom of God.

## Section 3: Marriage

Secondly, we consider virtue in the life of marriage. "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled." Holiness in marriage is the concern of the writer of Hebrews. Marriage is not a private matter, marriage is for the Church, for the Kingdom of God. That's why the writer includes instructions on marriage shortly after speaking of Jesus' unshakeable kingdom.

In this past decade, we have lived through our society's broad rejection of defining marriage between one man and one woman. But our conviction remains steadfast that God gave the institution of marriage to be shared only between one man and one woman.

This is our church's clear conviction regarding marriage, yet something else has drastically changed in the past decade that has nothing to do with the definition of marriage. It has

become much more common in recent years that, prior to their wedding, even a Christian man and a Christian woman are sexually active and/or cohabitating without any understanding these practices contradict Scripture. We have a generation of young people who have grown up without learning about the call to holiness with their bodies.

I am not here to speak condemnation. I believe in the full ministry of healing grace and restoration in Jesus Christ where anyone or any couple has succumbed to temptation. There is no condemnation for those who have nailed their sins to the cross of Christ. That said, we must not be confused regarding the biblical call to holiness outside and inside of marriage. We believe in celibacy outside of marriage and chastity within marriage between one man and one woman.

Now I grew up in churches that taught me the way of abstinence, but you know what was missing in that conversation? The story of God, the Kingdom of God, and the mystery of God. God gave Adam and Eve a grand mystery but they sinned together. The writer of Hebrews calls Christian men and women to holiness in marriage because they are literally repairing creation when they ground their life together in Jesus Christ. If we speak about marriage between one man and one woman in our time; if we speak about holiness in sexuality, let us anchor these convictions in the Kingdom of God and his great mystery.

Marriage is a covenant, not just between one man and one woman, not only with God, but also with his Church. I once heard someone say that two Christians ought to marry if they can embody the Kingdom of God better together than they can apart. As we have said in this pulpit before, marriage is not necessary in the Kingdom of God. Baptism makes us whole, not marriage. But if the Lord calls a man and woman to marriage, they are called to be an icon of Jesus' kingdom and his sacrificial love. Marriage isn't about a man and woman's happiness; it's about embodying the Kingdom of God.

In our Anglican marriage service, there comes a holy moment after vows have been exchanged between man, woman, and church in the sight of God, when the priest pronounces that the man and woman have *become* husband and wife in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, saying, 'Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.'

What has happened is the Great Mystery that these two persons have become one—in the sight of God, in the presence of his Church, for *the sake of* the Church, for the glory of God. It is this holy, sacramental moment, with all the Scripture and tradition that undergirds it, that calls a man and woman to bodily holiness before their wedding day. It is not good for their bodies to be united before they have been united in Christ. But with the submission of a man and woman to the Church's call to holiness, with the word of blessing, we honor the intimacy that comes with marriage.

## Section 4: Freedom from Money

The third virtue in the root system of Jesus' kingdom is contentment, or freedom from the love of money. Orthodox Christians have been concerned with matters regarding marriage for some time, yet we have not spoken with the same urgency regarding the love of money. We cannot remain silent in our words and action about the deception and allure of greed in our time.

We live in the wealthiest society to ever walk the planet. All the messages, banner ads, and billboards we see each day are targeting our inner restlessness. The markets literally need our restlessness. Advertisements are telling us we don't have enough. And many of the products we purchase, such as cell phones, are designed to break down, become obsolete, or be replaced. The goal is to keep us purchasing. And lately, this kind of marketplace has taken on the form of a consumer religion.

Enter a Google search and see what the search phrase "evangelism marketing" produces. You will find numerous articles training people how to make customers their evangelists. I recently saw an image of a conference speaker, addressing a packed auditorium, encouraging his listeners, in a massive font on his presentation: turn customers into fanatics, products into an obsession, and make your brand a religion.

This is not the message of outliers or a radical few. This is the everyday speech among many. The orthodoxy of many companies (certainly not all) is to create, not just customers, but a congregation. We must become wise to the fact that many of the products we purchase or consider purchasing are deliberately leading us away from contentment.

Now an important disclaimer: I do believe that there are virtuous and holy ways to publicize goods and services. We ought to encourage, form, and mentor Christians for the marketplace and all sectors of business. God made us to be makers, repairers, and servants; to make good products and serve our neighbors with a just exchange for the moral goodness of all, and especially for the poor among us. So we must recognize that Christians who serve in all manner of businesses and industries have a different way of offering goods and services. Christians offer goods and services so that their customers and their employees can find freedom and contentment.

Financial freedom means having enough for today, enough to save some for tomorrow, and enough to share as Wendell Berry says. But there is a much greater, eternal freedom than this: finding contentment and spiritual freedom, whether in plenty or in want, so that in all circumstances you can say from the heart, "The Lord is my helper, I will not fear, what can man do to me?"

Last year I heard Nathan Sheets, the owner of Nature Nate's Honey Company, talk about how the Kingdom of God shapes his company. Nature Nate's has become very successful because it's very good (I've tasted it!), and it's free of weird ingredients and harmful chemicals. But he's also cared for his employees well throughout the company's history. The Honey Company gives generously on women in need, families in need, and has trained villages in the Amazon rainforest in beekeeping. Here is an excellent example of contentment. Contentment is not only about my comfort and satisfaction. It's about my neighbor and my community's contentment. Contentment is communal—communal in the Kingdom of God, for the glory of God.

## Closing

It's an interesting rhythm. We gather here at the heavenly Mt Zion with angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven to offer God our reverent and awe-filled worship. Then we get into the most earthbound routines, infusing them with the story and beauty of God's kingdom on earth. No matter how culture changes, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His Kingdom call to holiness requires our total love for Christ and our neighbor. But he has given us his Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, all holiness, and all freedom.

## The Ethics of Christ's Unshakeable Kingdom

For it is for freedom that Christ has made us free, for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.