

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

Hebrews 13

Having made his case for the superiority of Messianic Judaism over Levitical Judaism, and the importance for His audience to remain faithful and not drift away, the author concludes his epistle with a series of final exhortations that relate to godly living within the believing community.

Exhortations to godly living (13:1-17)

v. 1 – Exhortation to brotherly love.

The Greek word here is *philadelphia*. Human nature is to reserve love for those with whom we have a blood or physical kinship. That was especially true in the world in a general sense at the time when Hebrews was written. But the Jewish culture was unique in extending that connection to those who are outside your family. That was a value based on the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). The incentive to act on that commandment was enhanced by Yeshua’s teaching on the identity of our neighbors (Lk 10:29-37) and the family of God (Mat 12:50). Since the kingdom of God is already present in substance, practicing brotherly love within believing communities now is consistent with the kind of love we will have for one another in the world to come, which is something that will not be based on family ties.

v. 2 – Exhortation to show hospitality to strangers.

This requires a willingness to be kind to people in a general sense and to do things for people we have never met previously. The author’s inspired statement—“some have entertained angels without knowing it” is a reference to the story in Genesis 18-19 regarding the three angels who looked like men and appeared to Abraham, and then appeared to Lot. In that story, Abraham welcomed them with hospitality (Gen 18:16).

v. 3 – Exhortation to care for prisoners.

The circumstances are a bit more specific in this context. Roman prisons did not provide any materials needs for those imprisoned. So family and friends would send food and clothing. The author also notes that they are “those who are ill-treated” and that they are all part of the same body. So the prisoners in view here are believers who have been imprisoned for their faith. This is consistent with the only other usage of the word in 11:37 regarding heroes of the faith who were ill-treated. In a general sense, believers should be compassionate toward those who are imprisoned. But contextually it focuses on those in the believing community who are persecuted for their faith. And that would entail participating in and supporting ministries that deal with issues of persecution.

v. 4 – Exhortation to prevent harm to your marriage sexually.

It is no coincidence that the author gives this exhortation and the next one consecutively, for throughout history, sexual failures and financial stresses have shown to be the most common factors in the demise of marriages.

v. 5 – Exhortation to avoid loving money.

Accumulating wealth can be a significant problem because it can create a sense of self-reliance. The antidote described here is twofold: First, learning to be content with whatever you have. And second, remembering that God will never desert us or forsake us. He lends credence to that point by quoting from Deuteronomy 31:6 and 31:8. That promise was given by God right before the people entered the Promised Land, which would be marked by conflict with the Canaanites. This principle regarding our finances can be applied practically. In times of conflict with loved ones over finances, or when we find ourselves in a battle trying to make ends meet, we have to claim this promise that the Lord will never forsake us.

v. 6 – He follows up with another quotation, this time from Psalm 118:6. This is another statement of putting things in perspective. Other people can harm us or take things away from us, but they can never take away our most precious possession—our spiritual inheritance that secures our place in the world to come.

v. 7 – The author gives a series of ways that his audience could do well in terms of worship and community life. The first one involves honoring the teaching and model of former leaders by doing what they taught and modeled.

v. 8 – This verse is often used as evidence for the eternity of Yeshua. While He is indeed eternal in nature, that is not a random point being made by the author here. It has to be read in context. This section has to do with ways of success for worship and community life. This verse is a bridge from verse 7 involving past teachers to verse 9 involving present teachers. So with that foundation in mind, what is his point in saying that “Yeshua is the same yesterday and today and forever?” Any teaching that is truly of the Lord will be consistent over time. This is especially true when a teaching arises that does not have a basis in Scripture.

v. 9 – He illustrates that principle by citing a current teaching involving food and the heart. In the biblical culture the heart represented your place of consciousness or your thinking. That means someone was apparently teaching that people can strengthen our thinking by eating certain foods. So he is using that as an example of how we can go astray when we fail to make Yeshua and His teachings the center of everything we do. It is God’s grace and the truth that it brings that strengthens our thinking, not eating certain foods.

vv. 10-14 – He then makes a transition to a final exhortation to remain in Messianic Judaism rather than returning to Levitical Judaism. In verse 10 he alludes to Yeshua as an altar from which Levitical priests cannot eat. We know that it was common for the priests to eat the meat of sacrifices offered on the altar in front of the tabernacle and later, the temple. But as verse 11 shows, that was not the case for the annual sacrifices of the bull and the goat on Yom Kippur (Lev 16:27). Those sacrifices were burned up completely, and not on the altar but outside the camp of the tabernacle. In verse 12 he draws a parallel by showing how Yeshua was executed “outside the gate,” which is another way of saying, “outside the camp.” He was killed outside the walls of Jerusalem because the Torah required it. According to Leviticus 24:14, blasphemers (people who speak evil against Adonai) were to be executed outside the camp. And we know that Yeshua was falsely found guilty of blasphemy by the Sanhedrin (Mat 26:64-65).

Symbolically, then, there are two kinds of sacrifices. The Levitical sacrifices at the altar, where only priests could participate. And the sacrifice of Messiah outside the camp, where everyone who believes in Him can participate, but not those who are stuck in Levitical Judaism, as verse 10 brings out. Therefore, the author exhorts his audience in verse 13 to meet Yeshua outside the camp, or outside Levitical Judaism. Likewise, according to verse 14, we are called to go outside the physical old city of Jerusalem to the new city that is promised to us, as he discussed previously.

- v. 15 – He makes three more practical exhortations, first to continually praise and thank God.
- v. 16 – The second practical exhortation is to do good and to share (materially) with others.
- v. 17 – The author shows discernment regarding the interaction between leaders and the people of a congregation. He expresses concern that the leaders should not have to experience grief caused by the people, but instead enabling them to feel joy. And in the end, joyful leaders will be in the best interests of the people.

Concluding personal exhortations and benediction (13:18-25)

- vv. 18-19 – The author requests prayer for himself and others, which demonstrates that he has had a previous face-to-face relationship with them.
- vv. 20-21 – In the author’s benediction, Adonai is called the “God of peace” and He raised Yeshua from the dead. This is the only direct reference to the resurrection in Hebrews.
- v. 23 – He passes along the news that Timothy had been released from prison. So that tells us that the author was at least part of the extended circle of leaders that included Timothy.
- v. 24 – He also sends greetings from unnamed but probably known individuals who were Italian believers.
- v. 25 – And then a simple closing line, “Grace be with you all.”