

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 12, Hebrews 13:1-25: A God-pleasing Response

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While some scholars have considered chapter 13 to be a series of tacked-on instructions that are not integral to the sermon, and perhaps even a later edition, these exhortations actually relate directly both to the argumentation of the preceding sermon and the challenges facing the congregation. The preacher here gives the hearers some specific directions concerning how they are to persevere in the face of a hostile society and arrive safely and unwearied at the goal of the lasting city that is to come. Hebrews 13:1 to 21, outlines the response that shows gratitude toward God and that pleases God.

The passage is bracketed and given thematic consistency by words related to the term well-pleasingly, *euarestos*, found in the introductory exhortation of 12:28, let us show gratitude through which we worship God in a well-pleasing manner. This same term appears near the end of these exhortations in chapter 13, verse 16: let us not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well-pleased, *euaresto*. And then, finally, in the benediction that closes the sermon portion of this text, we find the author praying that God will be, quote, working in you what is well-pleasing, *euareston*, before him, through Jesus Christ.

Of course, this word group also recalls Hebrews 11:5 to 6, where pleasing God is essential to the transcendence of death and is the consequence of trusting God, continuing to rely on God's favor, and responding faithfully to God. In this chapter, the author puts forward exhortations to maintain solidarity and support throughout the Christian group, which allows individual believers to persevere in the confession of hope, however marginalized they might become. He exhorts the hearers to remain distant from the pursuit of status and wealth in this world, and he presents exhortations to the hearers to find their firmness in Jesus and the relationship of grace established through Jesus with God.

All these things, taken together, show how to live in a manner well-pleasing to God and how to make a just and fitting return to God for benefits received and benefits yet to come. The sermon closes with material well-suited to the means of communication to which the author is reduced, namely, having to send his sermon in the form of a written communication. Thus, in Hebrews 13, 18 to 25, we find elements that typically close an epistle, especially as these elements are known in Christian discourse.

With that, the author brings to an end one of the most profound pieces of communication in the New Testament. In Hebrews 16, 1 through 6, the author

commends some key behaviors and orientations to his addressees. This section is given coherence through words related by the Greek lexeme *phil*, the lexeme related to love and affection.

This lexeme appears several times in these six verses. *Phil*, *Adelphia*, for brotherly love, in verse 1. *Phil*, *Oxenia*, for hospitality, in verse 2. And *aphil*, *Argoros*, refraining from the love of money, in verse 5. And so, we read, let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to love visiting guests, for through hospitality, and some have unwittingly entertained angels.

Remember the imprisoned as being imprisoned together with them, the mistreated as being yourselves in their skin. Let marriage be respected in all things, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the fornicators and adulterers. In these opening four verses, the author first and foremost holds out the importance of maintaining *Phil-Adelphia*, the love that characterizes siblings.

The ethos of siblings was an important topic in ethical works of the Greco-Roman period. Book 8 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Plutarch's *Treatise on Fraternal Affection* provide two examples of how Greek ethicists thought brothers and sisters ought to behave toward one another. Indeed, in that larger cultural ethos, we find many elements of the love for brothers and sisters that Christian authors enjoin upon their own audiences.

For example, cooperation, solidarity, and the sharing of possessions are all values to be enacted among kin. Of course, in the Christian community, this is not among kin of a natural sort but among people who have become related by shared ideals and commitments, and particularly, the belief that they have all been adopted into the same family by God. Mutual love and support by the group, *Phil-Adelphia*, that level of intense devotion, kinship, and investment in one another, had to compensate for lost networks of support and relationships outside the group, as well as offset the erosive effects of the Christian's unbelieving neighbors' rejection and hostility.

A second quality that the author promotes here is hospitality, the love of guests and strangers. This was an essential practice for maintaining a Christian community, first because the very existence of Christian communal worship depended upon individuals being willing to open up their homes for meetings of the group, despite, in some settings, the stigma that this brought as one identified oneself and one's household as supporters of the Christian movement. The early Christian movement also depended upon hospitality for traveling missionaries, traveling teachers, and emissaries of the churches, so hospitality was indeed a core value alongside sibling love, *Phil* and *Adelphia*, for maintaining the early Christian group and network of churches.

The rationale that the author gives for maintaining the love of guests is a general reference to those biblical stories in which hospitality was extended unknowingly to angels. We might think here, especially of the stories in Genesis 18 and 19, in which Abraham and Sarah, and then Lot, show hospitality to strangers who turn out to be angels of the Lord. The third injunction in this series is to remember those in prison as if in prison with them and those who are mistreated as if in their skin.

The opening command to remember provides artistic balance to and an avoidance of repetition with the injunction not to forget in verse two. This command stresses once again the importance of providing relief in the forms of material and emotional support to those believers whom society has most targeted. If the group was willing to mobilize such support under such conditions, every member of the group would know that whatever society throws my way, my sisters and brothers will not leave me comfortless.

They will not fail me. The conviction that siblings were so closely united as to be in essence the same thing, though in separate individuals, as Aristotle puts it in his *Ethics*, undergirds the exhortation to regard the sufferings of another as one's own sufferings, and to alleviate them as wholeheartedly and as bravely as one would hope one's own distress to be relieved. The satirist Lucian bears witness that this attitude is thoroughly established among the Christians by the second century AD.

His satire, entitled *The Passing of Peregrinus*, opens a window into how Christians extended care and support to their own. In this story, Peregrinus is basically a ne'er-do-well philosopher and peddler of religion who, for a while, poses as a Christian teacher and philosopher, and so moves from church to church and basically mooches off the support of this Christian movement for a while. When Peregrinus lands himself in prison, the Christians pour themselves out to take care of him, to keep him company, and to bring him everything they need.

Lucian explains this in this way. Thus, their first lawgiver, here thinking about Jesus, persuaded them that they are all brothers and sisters of one another. Therefore, they despise all things, all material goods, indiscriminately, and consider them common property.

As siblings in Christ, the believers are to pull together in every way so that every member of the family arrives safely at the heavenly goal. In times past, the preacher's audience had displayed this very quality of not failing to identify with and help and support their most marginalized sisters and brothers, as the preacher recalled in chapter 10, verses 32 to 34. And so, in this exhortation, he is urging them to do so more and more.

In 13.4, the author shifts his focus to the kinds of love not to show. Here, fidelity in marriage is urged as a continued value among the group. So, by refraining from

wrong forms of love, the believer seeks to avoid damaging those intimate relationships between people who should rather be supporting one another the most closely in the Christian enterprise.

The rationale that he adduces will be familiar to the hearers by now: God's future judgment of adulterers and fornicators. A second kind of love that draws people away from their forward movement toward God is the love of money, which would be equally devastating to and erosive of Christian commitment in this setting since deprivation of money is one of society's deviancy control techniques, as the author has reminded the hearers in chapter 10, verse 34. In the past, they had been challenged to accept with joy the seizure or the pillaging of their property as one of the ways in which they pushed past and got beyond society's attempts to hold them back.

Hence, the author encourages the hearers to let their way be free from the love of money and be content with what they have, for he himself has said, I will never leave you nor abandon you so that we are emboldened to say, the Lord is my help. I will not fear. What can a human being do to me? The author is not simply urging them to avoid greed, but rather not to seek to regain at the cost of losing their reward what they had lost for Christ's sake in previous times.

Their detachment from wealth now will bring them better and lasting possessions in a country where their honor will be that of the children of God. The author also emphasizes throughout the sermon what the hearers do, in fact, have. One major good that they enjoy is access to God's favor for timely help throughout their pilgrimage, as the author had exhorted them in chapter 4, verse 16: let us, therefore, approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

He reminds them of this privilege here using the words of scripture, for God himself has said, I will surely never leave you nor forsake you. The author here has taken language from Deuteronomy 31 verse 6, where the author writes, your God will certainly never leave you nor abandon you, modifying it by making it a first-person statement by God. This offers the hearers a basis for confidence once again, as throughout the sermon, in their connection with God and God's willingness always to stand by the hearers and to provide for them what they need to persevere in that journey on which God had set them out, to begin with.

The author uses a recitation from Psalm 118 verse 6 to characterize the appropriate response to God's promises, a response that he hopes the hearers will continue to internalize and manifest themselves. Thus, he writes, so we are emboldened to say, the Lord is my help. I will not be afraid.

What can a human being do to me? The hearers, if they adopt the posture modeled by the psalmist, will continue to reject fear in the face of human opposition, given the greatness of divine assistance that they enjoy on their journey. It expresses the confidence that they can win their current contest because God is their ally. The author thus seeks to continue to embolden the hearers to persevere in gratitude and loyalty to God and God's son and to keep moving them forward in obedient discipleship because, indeed, they have nothing to fear from those who would oppose them on that journey.

The next block of exhortation, while moving through a wide array of topics, continues to serve the author's goal of moving the hearers to find the center that gives them stability and firmness in their Christian hope, and thus also reliability in their relationship with and obligations to one another and to Jesus. And so, in Hebrews 13, 7 to 8, we read, remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Looking to the end result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

Jesus Christ is yesterday and today, the same and forever. By referring to those who spoke the word of God to you, the author is probably referring back to the earlier evangelistic team around whose proclamation the Christian community was formed. When the preacher urges the hearers to consider the outcome or end result of their conduct, the word *ekbasis* here being a frequent euphemism for death, he seems to indicate that these evangelists have since joined the great cloud of witnesses themselves, leaving behind further examples of lives lived in faith to the very end, worthy of the hearer's imitation.

The leaders' firmness and their faith were made possible by the unwavering reliability of the object of their trust, Jesus, who is the same yesterday and today and forever. This famous statement in Hebrews 13:8 is not a detached affirmation of divine changelessness, but an affirmation of Jesus' ongoing reliability. Dio Chrysostom, a Greek philosopher and statesman who lived from about AD 50 to about 120, provides a helpful comparative text in the context of his oration on distrust.

He complains that, quote, with human beings, there is no constancy or truthfulness at all. What someone has said about fortune might much rather be said about human beings, namely, that no one knows about anyone whether he will remain as he is until tomorrow. At any rate, people violate the compacts they make with one another.

Because of this instability with human beings, Dio thinks it is more prudent not to trust human beings insofar as one can avoid it. The author of Hebrews affirms, however, that there is one man whose character and word do not change through the ages but rather who remains constant. Because of this constancy, the hearers

may trust Jesus today and tomorrow, even as yesterday, their leaders trusted Jesus and were not disappointed.

Jesus' favor, which is not here today and gone tomorrow but always present toward his faithful ones, becomes thereby the source of stability for the hearts of the addressees. This is an effective summary of one major thrust of the sermon, namely, the fact that the one who has promised is faithful or reliable. In the following verses we read, do not be swept along by diverse and foreign teachings, for it is a fine thing for the heart to be made firm by favor and not by foods.

Those who followed such practices did not benefit from them, but we have an altar from which those worshiping at the tent have no authority to eat. Jesus, the basis for trust, stands in contrast with unreliable things from which people might seek to secure some stable mooring for themselves. We should pause for a moment to observe the argumentative framework of this section.

The author gives a piece of advice in 13:9, which is not to be carried away with diverse and foreign teachings. He then adds an explanatory rationale, for it is a good thing for the hearts to be established by grace, not by foods that have not benefited those who live by them. To this, he adds a second rationale, for we have an altar from which those who serve at the earthly tent have no authority to eat.

The rhetorical purpose of 13:9, therefore, is to provide a foil for the secure foundation for trust, namely Jesus, whom the community's founders in 13.7 found to be an ample and adequate anchor for their own hope's arrival at port. Any teaching that is older or newer or other than the teaching about Jesus' effective mediation of God's favor and the way in which to remain in favor threatens the hearer's own stability in Christ. Such teaching threatens to carry them off, precisely the opposite of remaining in a fixed place of firmness.

It is quite different for us, so far removed from the immediate setting of the congregation, to discern precisely what the preacher is referring to if he was targeting particular teachings floating around the congregations. What is clear is that discovering stability for one's life in the reciprocity of the grace relationship with God through Christ is a noble or honorable course. Any other course is of no benefit.

The diverse and strange teachings are relegated to the level of food. This recapitulates the preacher's basic distinction between the character of the old covenant, external regulations of limited efficacy and scope, and the new covenant, the favor of God, which has been gained for us by Jesus. In 13:10, we find a brief recapitulation of the argument and the exhortation of the whole sermon.

The hearers are again reminded of the incomparable advantages gained by Jesus' priestly mediation, which is presented here in terms of access to a cultic meal. Who

enjoyed what part of each animal sacrifice was carefully laid out in the Torah, and the privileges of the priests and of the deity were jealously guarded. The Christians, however, have a privileged place at a table to which even those honored priests may not come, at least not apart from their own reliance on Jesus.

While others enjoyed the shadow, the addressees enjoyed the real thing and should not relinquish this privilege for any lesser good. The altar is deliberately ambiguous so as to recall the entire discussion of Christ's priestly sacrifice and its benefits for the Christian community. Some interpreters have raised the possibility that the author is speaking about the table of communion, or the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist.

Participation in this ritual meal enacts Christians' participation in the benefits of Christ's body being broken for them and blood spilled for them. And so it resonates quite closely with the central themes of the sermon to the Hebrews. Although the author does not make such a reference to the Eucharist explicit, the pervasive nature of this ritual in the early church, and especially in Pauline circles, from which we would naturally believe the author of Hebrews and his addressees to come, and the interest of the sermon as a whole in the benefits gained for the hearers by Jesus' death for them, make this an attractive resonance.

The authors mention in 13:9-10 that sacrificial animals and sacred meals and rites, or lack of rites, take him back to the Day of Atonement rituals as a framework for thinking about Jesus' death. So we read in verses 11-14 that the bodies of these animals, whose blood is taken into the holy places through the high priest for a sin offering, are burned up outside the camp. Therefore, Jesus, in order to sanctify the people through his own blood, also suffered outside the gate.

Now then, let us go out to him outside the camp bearing his reproach, for we have no lasting city here, but we are seeking the one that is coming. The bodies from the Day of Atonement sacrifices were not, in fact, eaten by the priests of the tabernacle but burnt up entirely. While the blood was taken into the holy places by the high priest, they would take the bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was carried into the holy places to effect expiation, and carry them outside the camp and burn them up with fire, as Leviticus 16.27 stipulates.

The author of Hebrews essentially reads the prototype, namely the Day of Atonement ritual and all of its particulars, as a mandate for what has to happen in the antitype, namely the events of Jesus' life, down to the detail of his crucifixion happening outside the gate of the walls of Jerusalem. The prescription for the disposal of carcasses of atonement sacrifices in Leviticus reinforces the interpretation of Jesus' death outside the camp or outside the gate as a sacrifice performed to sanctify the people, recalling here in verse 12 the central argument of the sermon. The reminder of Jesus' selfless act of beneficence leads directly to a call to render gratitude in equal measure in verse 13.

Let us, therefore, go out to him outside the camp. The hearers ought not to flinch from the cost of being loyal, reverent, grateful beneficiaries of Jesus' gifts. Their debt to Jesus should lead them to leave the camp as he did for them and to bear reproach for his sake as he bore reproach for their sake.

This summons fits the larger metaphors of movement that the author has used to position the hearers in the world throughout the sermon. Going out from the camp is akin to leaving behind their place at home in the structures of this world, even as Abraham and Moses exemplified. Such going out is a prerequisite to drawing near to God and ultimately to entering the eternal realm where Jesus has gone as their forerunner.

The place outside the camp is an ambiguous one in the heritage of the Jewish scriptures. On the one hand, it is a place of uncleanness where lepers dwell, where the defiled wait out their purification, and where lawbreakers are executed. On the other hand, there are clean places outside the camp where sacrificial corpses are burned and, most strikingly, where God's presence is found.

We find this last instance in Exodus 33, verses 1 to 7, where, quote, Moses, taking the tent, pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp. And it happened that everyone seeking the Lord went out of the camp to the tent. The places in the margins outside the camp where the Christ followers addressed by Hebrews find themselves socially, economically, and politically are also the places of sacred power where God is to be encountered.

Bearing Christ's reproach here in 13 verse 13 also recalls Moses' willingness to do the same in chapter 11, verse 25, for the sake of a greater reward. Choosing to bear Christ's reproach is a wise and noble choice, as Moses demonstrated so long ago. That reproach means, in the end, greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for it is the mark of the one who has joined the people of God and thus come into the eternal inheritance of God's sons and daughters.

Persevering in the course that leads to the experience of loss and reproach now, for Jesus' sake, is ultimately the advantageous course, as the author reminds the hearers in the pun, contrasting their lack of a lasting city, a menuson city here, with the expectation of the coming city, the meluson city, that will endure eternally. Investment in one's position in this world, especially if it means the loss of a place in God's kingdom, the lasting or enduring kingdom, is just what foolish Esau would have done. Hebrews 13:15 to 16, extends the topic of making a fair return for favors received, particularly with a view to bringing honor to the patron and offering the services that will please him.

The author expresses this in cultic language, in keeping with the immediately preceding verses, the cultic overtones of the exhortation to gratitude in 12:28, and the central argument of the sermon concerning Jesus' consecration of the hearers that has made them fit to offer these acceptable sacrifices. Through Jesus Christ, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips confessing his name. Do not forget to do good and share, for with sacrifices of such a kind, God is well pleased.

The first verse here recontextualizes Psalm 50, verse 14, where the psalmist enjoins his hearers to offer God a sacrifice of praise, building on a long-standing tradition of the rationalization of sacrifice in the Jewish religion, whereby offerings involving praise, testimony, and acts of justice replace bloody animal sacrifices. Psalm 50, verses 12 and 13, in fact, had criticized the irrationality of thinking of giving God food and drink in animal sacrifices, presenting the sacrifice of praise instead as the reasonable alternative. Confession of God's name here means expanding the honorable reputation of the patron.

The Greek word was frequently chosen by the Septuagint translators throughout the Psalms to render the Hebrew, give thanks, stressing the public character of thanksgiving as testimony, public testimony to God's generosity. This is a poignant challenge in the setting addressed by our preacher, underscoring the public dimension of the testimony due to God as their benefactor. By word and by deed, the addressees are called to confess to their neighbors that God's gifts are good and worth the cost of remaining loyal to such a factor, thus maintaining the boldness, indeed the bold witness, that marked their earlier confrontations with their unbelieving neighbors.

The hearers are also called to offer to God their services on behalf of one another, pooling their resources and looking for opportunities to assist one another as any might have need. Do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices, God is well pleased, as the author enjoins in verse 16. The author's thought here is still very deeply rooted in Jewish reflection on what sacrifices God desires.

He again echoes the Old Testament prophets. For example, Amos calls for an outpouring of just dealings and righteous acts rather than the ritual slaughter of animals. Isaiah calls for the care of the poor and the homeless as the fast that pleases God, summoning the people to look out for the interests of the poor, the orphan, and the widow so that ritual sacrifices might again become acceptable.

While the hearers cannot repay God, who has need of nothing, they can indirectly repay God's generosity by extending kindness to one another, a point made most dramatically in Matthew chapter 25, verses 31 to 46. The author of Hebrews reinforces this connection between showing gratitude to God and giving assistance to one's sisters and brothers. The addressees offer these pleasing sacrifices

whenever they show diligence in serving the saints as they have been doing, as the author said in chapter 6, verse 10.

The hearers are here summoned not to neglect to do the noble works and to make the investment in one another that God also will not forget. As the author said in verse 9 of chapter 6, God is not unjust to forget your works of love and service. These will rather preserve the circle of grace unto the reception of eternal benefactions.

Hebrews 13, verses 18 to 25, conforms closely to the pattern of other early Christian letter closings, especially those found in 1 Peter 5 and Romans 15. This pattern of request, benediction, doxology, news, announcements of travel, greetings, and final farewell is an adaptation of the typical closings of Greco-Roman letters. The adaptation is particularly evident in the addition of a benediction and a doxology, which is particularly appropriate for the liturgical setting in which these early Christian letters and communications would tend to have been read.

Hebrews 13:17 could be heard as part of the block of the previous exhortation to be subject to or be obedient to your leaders, forming an inclusion with remember your leaders in 13:7. The injunction to remember former leaders who initially brought the gospel is balanced by an exhortation to obey their current leaders and teachers in the faith. But the same exhortation is also related thematically to the closing material, which gives considerable attention to the leadership figures to whom the addressees ought to be looking for guidance, for the ascription of honor or censure, whether it be local leaders as in verses 14 and 24, the author and his team in verses 18, 19, and 22, God in the benediction of verses 20 and 21, and even Timothy, whose likely visit is mentioned in verse 23. And so, we read here in verse 17, be subject to or be obedient to your leaders, be submissive, for they exercise watchful care over your souls as those who are about to give an account, in order that they may do this with joy and not with groaning, for this would be unprofitable for you.

The author shares something here about the ethos of Christian leadership. Leaders invest themselves tirelessly in their charges. The verb used carried the sense of losing sleep over their charges for the benefit of the latter.

They exercise this oversight ever mindful of God's own oversight of them as people who will give an account for themselves and their charges to the great shepherd of the sheep. The author asserts that it would be inexpedient for the community if their leader's ministry is a cause for sorrow to the leaders. Cooperation is to be the hallmark of the Christian community in every way, including cooperation with leadership for the good of the whole.

Energy spent on conflict is energy unavailable for edification and for resistance to other erosive forces from without. The author then launches a prayer request. Pray

for us, for we are persuaded that we have a good conscience in all things, desiring to conduct ourselves nobly.

I encourage you to do this all the more in order that I may be restored to you quickly. This prayer request is an instance of the sort of help one can expect from the throne of favor, as the author put it in 4:14-16. And the hearers are urged to seek timely help here for the speaker himself. The speaker affirms that he and his team, his partners in ministry, possess the good conscience before God that signifies the absence of obstacles between the speaker and the God who will grant their prayer, as well as between the speaker and the hearers, whose mediation he requests.

This prayer request echoes the great benefit that Christ has brought definitively to all believers, namely, purging their conscience from the defilement of sins. This prayer request is also a clear sign of prior acquaintance between the preacher and the congregation, for he writes, pray this in order that I might quickly be restored to you. They have some sort of prior relationship, the preacher having been present with a congregation at least at some point in the past.

The author next pronounces a benediction over his congregation, granted at a distance with the following verses. And may the God of peace, who led up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, our Lord Jesus, make you complete in every good thing in order to do his will, fashioning in you what is well pleasing before him through Jesus Christ, to whom be honor forever. Amen.

This concluding benediction weaves together several important themes from the earlier exposition and exhortations. First, it again presents God as the active cause of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, thus again as the one who has the power to bring life from death, an emphasis that we saw running through Hebrews 11. It also speaks of God's raising of Jesus as a sign of God's acceptance of the covenant established by Jesus' sacrifice, a core theme of Hebrews 7 through 10.

The author borrows language from Isaiah 63 verse 11, where God raises up Moses from the earth as a shepherd of the sheep. The author is drawing an implicit comparison here, speaking of Jesus now as the great shepherd of the sheep, great being a word elsewhere applied to Jesus in Hebrews, as in great high priest in 10:21. This is an implicit reminder of Jesus' superiority to earlier mediators of God's favor, such as Moses, where explicit comparisons had been made previously in Hebrews 3:1 to 6. The description of Jesus as a shepherd is widespread in Christian culture. One might recall the gospel of John, chapter 10:11 to 14, or 1 Peter 2:25.

It also resonates with Jewish discourse about God as the shepherd of the people of Israel in Ezekiel 34 or the shepherd of the individual righteous person in Psalm 23. The author calls upon God to furnish the addressees with every good thing to make

them complete for the doing of God's will, just as Jesus made the doing of God's will his central agenda. One might recall here the author's application of Psalm 40 verse 8 in Hebrews 10:4 to 10.

Look, here I am, I come to do your will. So now, this doing of God's will is to become the focus of the addressees as well. Again, to be pleasing before God is the primary consideration that the author has held up before the hearers throughout chapters 11 and 12, rather than to seek to be pleasing to human beings, for example, the Christian's unbelieving neighbors.

As with all God's gifts, these, too, the ability to be pleasing to God and to consistently do God's will, will be secured through Jesus Christ, who remains thus firmly in his role of broker or mediator of divine favor. It is not immediately clear to whom the preacher is referring when he writes at the conclusion of this benediction, to whom be glory forever. Is it God, or is it Jesus? The proximity of the name of Jesus to this relative pronoun makes him the more natural reference.

But on the other hand, the preacher has been rather theocentric throughout his exhortations. It is to God that gratitude must be shown through reverent worship in 12:28. It is to God that sacrifices of praise, confession, and service are offered through Jesus Christ in 13:15, and 16.

This might suggest that God is again the recipient of honor for the gifts he gives through Jesus Christ, ever the mediator to those who approach God through him. The author closes his sermon now in verses 22 to 25 with the familiar elements of news and benediction. He writes, I encourage you, sisters and brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for indeed I have written to you briefly.

You know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes quickly, I will see you. Greet all your leaders and all the holy ones. Those from Italy, greet you.

The author's designation of his own work as a word of exhortation suggests that it belongs to the genre of homily or sermon, as indeed, the term comes to be used increasingly. In Acts 13, verse 15, we find the phrase used in a diaspora synagogue to refer to a homily. The author affirms that he has kept the message brief so as not to strain their attentiveness.

The fact that this sermon would take almost an hour to read effectively and emotively should not make us read this remark as disingenuous. Many of Diocritus' or Cicero's speeches would have taken three times as long to deliver. The letter closes with news, travel plans, greetings, and a formulaic benediction.

As far as news is concerned, the author passes on a report that our brother Timothy has been released, which may already be old news as far as the congregation is concerned. You know that our brother Timothy has been released. Likely, this is the same Timothy who was Paul's traveling companion and protege.

Released implies recent imprisonment, a condition to which Christian ring leaders were frequently subjected. This imprisonment of Timothy is otherwise unattested in the New Testament unless it happens to be the one shared by Timothy with Paul, referred to in Philemon, verse 1. The author suggests that Timothy is presently traveling to the author's location so that both may visit the congregation together, but the author appears so anxious to visit this congregation that he may not wait. The addressees may thus look forward to the return of this leader and teacher and thus to have his resources for the group's perseverance at their disposal in person.

The author asks the hearers to greet their leaders and all the holy ones and passes on the greetings of those from Italy in verse 24. This is probably more of a formulaic request to pass along the preacher's greetings to the whole congregation, something that is accomplished at the moment that the sermon is read out loud to them. As we explored in an introductory segment, the greeting conveyed by the author from those from Italy has figured prominently in reconstructions of the addressee's location.

While suggesting some connection with Italy, particularly the church at Rome, it is difficult to decide whether the greeting comes from Italians present with the author in Rome sent to a congregation outside of Italy, to which the author will be returning later, or whether the greeting comes from Italians present with the author outside of Italy sending their greetings back home. But as we explored earlier, the former possibility does seem to have greater weight. Both the particular language here, *hoi apotes italias*, those from Italy, favor a place of origin rather than a place of separation.

The evidence in early manuscripts where scribes attempt to provide something of a title in which the location of the author and the addressees is given unanimously favors Italy as the place of origin for this sermon. We should not underestimate the power of these little reminders of the global or at least the trans-local nature of the Christian movement. Believers in any one location may take heart in knowing that they are part of a much larger band and not quite so small a minority as their local circumstances might make them think.

The author closes with a formulaic pronouncement of blessing. May grace be with you all, or may favor be with you all. This appears throughout Christian literature at the close of communications.

For example, in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and several other epistles. While it is admittedly formulaic, it is a singularly appropriate closing to this sermon in which God's grace and the ways in which Jesus has secured favor for the believers have been such prominent topics and in which perseverance in the church has been promoted as the way also to remain within the sphere of God's favor, while defection has been condemned as the path to exclusion from favor. Thus, the concluding wish of the sermon may grace be with you all, represents the summation of the author's exhortations to the hearers to indeed continue to persevere in the path of experiencing God's favor rather than tossing it aside.

Far from being an afterthought or a series of tacked-on exhortations, Hebrews 13 adds significantly to the rhetorical force of the sermon. The exhortations of 13:1-16, in particular, have great force because of the way in which they have been introduced with the injunction of chapter 12:28. These are the practices that constitute an appropriate response of gratitude to God and that make one's walk well-pleasing to God with whom is our accounting.

The author also gives continued attention in this portion of his sermon to the social engineering that is necessary for helping each believer withstand the stresses and strains that their neighbors inflict upon them. The image of going outside of the camp as a path to drawing near to their abiding city also carries considerable rhetorical weight. This is yet another image by which the author is encouraging the hearers to regard perseverance in this journey as the beneficial way forward.

Going out of the camp repeats the pattern that their forerunner, Jesus, pioneered for them as he went outside of the camp and was crucified outside of the gates in obedience to God as a way station, in effect, on the way back to his session in glory. As the hearers themselves go out of the camp following Jesus and leaving their place in their own society, they too can be assured first that they are making an appropriate return to Jesus for his investment in them and his willingness to bear reproach for them, and second that they are going to arrive at the end where their forerunner has already arrived on their behalf. The author thus continues to promote giving back to Jesus as Jesus gave to them, enduring for Jesus some small part of what Jesus endured for them as an essential component of making a fair return.

The author also promotes confession of the name of Christ, the public declaration of gratitude to Jesus and the God of Israel with whom Jesus has connected them, as well as acts of service and support for their fellow believers as suitable thanks offerings to God. Again, the importance of the core social value of reciprocity emerges here for the rhetorical strategy of this sermon overall. The author's exhortations in this chapter continue to speak to contemporary Christians in some very direct ways.

His elevation of the value of philadelphia, brotherly and sisterly love, as the ethos that is to characterize relations within the church, challenges us to make of brother and sister more than casual terms of address. He urges us to continue getting more and more real in our investment in one another, in our letting our fellow Christians into our lives, and in our use of our resources for our sisters and brothers in need. The church can thus become a reliable haven of support that could help embolden many to leave harmful lifestyles and situations behind, knowing that they will be making that journey in the company of people who are fully invested in them to bring them through.

For individuals to feel that kind of support, however, requires the prior commitment of the believers within the church to be kin, one to another, and to assume the obligations and the mutual commitment that being family entails. The author also urges us to make hospitality a real and regular practice in our churches, both toward other Christians and toward those also to whom we might minister as Christians, showing a surprising level of love and grace. This outreaching love for sisters and brothers must extend particularly to those brothers and sisters who are most marginalized.

The author reminds us, as he urges his own congregations, to remember those in prison as if imprisoned with them and those who are being mistreated as if in their very skin. This urges us to adopt the ethos of a global family of God for Christians in repressive environments. The challenge for us as their sisters and brothers is to look out for them as such, as our family.

I've been surprised over the years to discover how reluctant many Christians are to really learn about the scenarios that many Christians face worldwide. Being family for our sisters and brothers in Christ requires opening our eyes and hearts to what is going on beyond our borders and making their plight our immediate concern and interest, as though we were in their skin. This could lead us to several venues for investing ourselves in the support and relief of our family in these repressive environments, including prayer, a commitment to shattering the silence about their plight, a commitment to mobilizing aid for those who are themselves marginalized, or in the case where Christians are even executed, supporting the families that they leave behind, who will therefore not feel forsaken by the God for whom they have given up so much, and also lobbying for an end to unjust repression.

The author also challenges us to keep identifying and rejecting courses of action that erode our Christian commitment and our ability to respond to God together as God deserves. The two that he names in Hebrews 13 continue to be challenges in many contemporary churches, the first being the challenge of marital fidelity, making the marriage bond a source of strength for perseverance rather than allowing it to become a stumbling block for our spouses and our congregations by failing to honor

and keep that relationship healthy. Secondly, the desire for gain, the love of money, as the author puts it, remains a grave stumbling block to committed discipleship.

The desire for more is a real challenge to faithfulness toward God. Acknowledging enough is the path to contentment and freeing up a great deal of time and energy to pursue God's agenda for our souls, for our churches, and for our world. People who have been educated and socialized to live in capitalist countries often have difficulty perceiving what is enough and rarely think to live with less in terms of this world's comforts and pleasures so as to be able to seek more of what God, of what makes us rich in God's sight.

And so, the author puts before us the need to continually examine ourselves. Are we trusting in our wealth, or are we trusting in God? Does our use of wealth show us to trust God, for example, as we use it according to what God values, like investing in the lives and well-being of our sisters and brothers in dire need? Or does our use of wealth show us to be seeking our fundamental security in our money, for example, as we build bigger barns for ourselves? The author also urges his hearers to go out to Jesus outside the camp bearing his reproach. Even in countries where Christianity is tolerated, we can be called to bear Christ's reproach.

For example, when we protest the injustice by which many profit, when we stand against the prejudices that many hold dear when we choose obedience to God's call when that means a loss in the goods that society around us prizes, the author would have us look carefully, discern carefully where we do not go for Christ for fear of the reproach we might have to bear for his sake, for fear of giving up something that is dear to us, or for fear of not attaining what our upbringing in the world has taught us is valuable. When our allegiance to God and obedience to God's call makes us bear this reproach, the author of Hebrews emboldens us to embrace it, since the way God is leading brings us nearer to the abiding city, our true home and goal, and further away from our entanglement in the worldly camp. At the close of his sermon, the author especially elevates the value of being well-pleasing to God as that which should be in the forefront of our ambitions and our agendas for ourselves.

And in particular, he urges us to take up those acts that, as people who have been consecrated by Jesus' death for us, become our priestly duty toward God. He urges us, along with his hearers, to keep offering to God the sacrifices that are well-pleasing to him, the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that acknowledge God's name, and also not to neglect doing good and sharing, moving these to the center of our lives and agendas as acts of thanksgiving to God. Thus, the author renders all of life potentially sacred as we conduct this duty of witnessing to God and serving our sisters and brothers because we engage in those activities.

As we engage in those activities, we are living out of the center of gratitude toward God. The sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips acknowledging God's name, encourages

us to be bold in speaking about God, even in the spaces where our culture has, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, made us uncomfortable with the idea of talking about acknowledging God's gifts to us and God's place in our lives. Were we, however, to keep our religion hidden away behind the doors of churches or the doors of homes, we should become what the author of Hebrews urged his hearers so strongly not to become: Christians without boldness, fear, or willingness to speak about their connections with Jesus in the public hearing.

Our response of gratitude also moves us into areas of obedient service. Protestant Christians are often particularly sensitive to how good works fit into the Christian life and are always on guard against anything that might give a whiff of works righteousness. The author of Hebrews gives us a different and, I think, better-integrated model.

Good works are a necessary part of our response of gratitude to God for all his gifts to us. While they do not earn God's favor, which is the initiating act, they are a necessary return of favor to God. And if this circle of reciprocity is anywhere broken, the beauty of the dance of Christian life that God set in motion is marred.

As we deepen our understanding of the immensity of God's favor and the gifts God bestows and will yet bestow, we will also find our commitment to return favor deepened, to bring honor to this God, and to serve him in complete loyalty. For this reason, the author commends grace as that which nobly and ably grounds the believer's heart, making him or her secure in Jesus' trustworthiness and also making him or her a reliable member of the household of God. Over the course of these presentations, we have covered a great deal of ground together, starting with what can be learned about the setting out of which the Sermon to the Hebrews arose and then working through the text from beginning to end to discern the ways in which a pastor in the first century sought to keep his congregation firm and fixed in their commitment to Christ and in their Christian hope in the face of the ongoing hardships and loss that such commitment brought upon them from their unsupportive neighbors.

Some of the primary takeaways from this study would include primarily keeping our eyes focused on Jesus, not losing sight of him and what is due him in the midst of the busyness of our everyday life, not losing sight in the midst of the challenges that come our way day by day of the greatness that Christ possesses by virtue of being son of God, seated at God's right hand, and not to lose sight of all that Jesus did, pouring himself out on our behalf to connect us to God and to bring us into the life that pleases God, the life that lasts forever. The author of Hebrews would have us, as he would have had his original audience, make this the primary focal point of our lives, the starting point for our charting our course day by day so that we do not drift away. A second important lesson that the author of Hebrews would imprint upon us is to allow ourselves to have a full awareness of how we have been graced by God

and to commit ourselves to responding to God as God's generosity requires and deserves.

He places gratitude as a core value before our eyes, urging us to think in everything that we do about how we might bring honor or show loyalty or offer obedient service to the God who has done so much for us or how what we are contemplating might detract from God's honor or might show disloyalty toward our great patron or might enact some disobedience that affronts him. And because of gratitude, because of our awareness of what God has done for us and given us, and what God yet holds out before us with his unfailing promises, the author always urges us always to choose the course of action that exhibits our commitment to God, our gratitude to God in those situations. Something else that the author imprints upon us indelibly is the importance of our supporting one another on this journey of faith.

From beginning to end, he reminds his own hearers that no one of us can safely count on arriving at the goal on our own, but at many points, we will rely upon our sisters and brothers for refocusing, for correction, for emotional and even material support along this journey. And so he urges us to make sure that in our own lives, in our congregational lives, we are moving closer and closer to becoming this supportive, mutually investing family so that no one of us will fall short of all that God, in God's grace, has set before us.