

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 14, Key Focal Points for Preaching on Hebrews Today

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In this final session, we will look at several facets of the author of Hebrew's proclamation to Christians in our generation and what this sermon has proclaimed to Christians in every generation. While you can find many more specific sermon ideas for preaching to the whole of Hebrews in my commentary, *Perseverance and Gratitude*, and my more recent book, *Hebrews, Grace, and Gratitude*, I want to focus here just on five keywords that the author of Hebrews continues to speak to us and to our congregations as we carry on his task of calling upon our brothers and sisters today. If you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

The first such word is, do not lose sight of life's top priority. The Christians that the author addressed had been hearing many messages from their neighbors, discouraging them from investing themselves in following Jesus. In the midst of this cacophony, the author reminds his hearers that God spoke.

In Jesus, God gave the most complete revelation of who God is. In Jesus, all the earlier revelations of God come together with brilliant clarity and fullness. In Jesus, God promises deliverance from all the powers of death and a glorious eternity.

In God's presence, this is a message that must take precedence over every other message in our lives. The preacher would have our first priority be to respond to the word that God has spoken and still speaks. This is a theme that runs throughout his sermon like a refrain.

How one responds to the message spoken by the son, whether or not one hardens one's heart when hearing God's voice, whether or not the good word of God has produced a suitable response. These are matters of life and death, of eternal judgment and deliverance for eternity for this author. The preacher found it necessary to reinforce the basic contours of the Christian worldview, which makes this a top priority.

And we will no doubt find it necessary to do the same, if not in the same terms, in some reconfiguration that makes sense within our congregation's culture. Everything that can be seen is a temporary reality. The material heavens and earth have no future, but will be shaken and removed on that great day that God has set.

Beyond the visible earth and heaven stands a superior eternal realm, heaven itself, as the author of Hebrews puts it. This is the realm in which God's full presence is enjoyed by the angelic hosts and the glorified Christ. From our perspective, it is the

coming realm, not in the sense that it doesn't already exist, but in the sense that it has yet to be revealed to human beings and experienced by us.

Because God's realm alone is eternal, everything that belongs to it is better. There, we will find better and lasting possessions.

We will find a better homeland because a heavenly homeland and an unshakable kingdom in which stands our abiding city. This is the place of God's rest into which God has invited us and for which the sun has purified us. The author of Hebrews urges us to live here so as to be welcomed there.

If we take this promise seriously, we must agree with the 17th-century poet and preacher John Donne, who said that every minute of this life depends on millions of years in the next. And so we will be sure not to stop short along the way, yielding our integrity and our commitments to God for the sake of lesser pleasures and pursuits. The danger for many of us is not that we will fail to accept Christ.

Rather, as for some of the first readers of Hebrews, the danger is that we will find the focus of our own concern and, therefore, our priorities slipping back to our condition in this temporary realm. There are many ways in which disciples can be distracted from making their response to God's word the top priority in their lives. The addressees' situation connects very directly with the situation of many Christians throughout the world whose contest indeed has been and threatens to be to the point of blood.

Through insults, abuse, economic deprivation, intimidation, torture, and even execution, many societies attempt to make disciples displace their response to God with the desire to hold on to freedom, family, and even life itself. Although persecution may not touch many of us in the Western world, we also are regularly tempted to sell our birthright for a single meal, like Esau, as we give our first and best efforts to lay up treasures on earth. How much time, energy, and resources are siphoned off from growing in our relationship with God, investing ourselves in meaningful service in God's name, and disciplining younger believers, including our own natural children, for the sake of acquiring better and high-status products to enhance the quality of life promoted by media and reinforced by worldly-minded neighbors and friends, or for the sake of a promotion at work? How often do we find ourselves distracted by pursuits and concerns that have nothing to contribute to our becoming like Christ, that provide no opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the lives of others? The preacher of Hebrews reminds us at every turn that all such goods belong to the temporary realm, to a world that is not lasting but is destined to be shaken together with all who have built their lives upon it.

We're given warning signs. We should perceive in the volatility of global markets and political arrangements the ease with which uneasy peace erupts into full-blown

conflict, the subjection of human experience to crime and natural disaster. These are all signs of the basic instability and the unreliability of all this-worldly things.

The preacher of Hebrews invites us to look long and hard at this reality and to understand that it is the friendship of Jesus and the pursuit of works that will bring one honor in God's sight, which, perhaps ironically, alone provides security even in this visible, volatile world. Again, we return to the importance of responding faithfully to the word spoken by the Son. As Jesus himself put it toward the close of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, all those who hear these words of mine and do them will be likened to a prudent person who built his house upon a rock.

This is what it means to live by faith in Hebrews. Faith here is not merely about beliefs but about making important decisions in our daily lives based on a broader perspective that looks to invisible realities and to future realities as the compass points for all of our deliberations. Faith acts as if all of God's promises are true and reliable.

Faith always orders life with a view to pleasing God and straining forward to the inheritance that God has promised rather than settling for the shallow wages that the world offers to its devotees. Faith responds to the circumstances of this world with a view to the future intervention of God and the reception of God's promises, as well as the invisible realities beyond this world. The heroes of Hebrews 11 had their priorities straight, and their examples continue to illumine the path before us and our congregations.

The second word that the preacher of Hebrews would continue to speak to us and our congregations is don't lose sight of what you have in Christ. We have a great high priest who has crossed through the heavens. We have an anchor for the soul.

We have an altar. The preacher is not holding out a mere carrot in front of a beleaguered congregation to goad them onto the eternal realm. He's also pointing to the overflowing cornucopia that they carry with them on their journey.

They should always hunger for entrance into God's full presence, but they certainly are not malnourished or faint along the way. Dwelling on what believers already have in Christ and perhaps what believers should allow to have fuller effects in their lives is an important strategy in this sermon for facilitating faithfulness and reminding disciples in every age why holding fast to a loyal and obedient response to God remains the most rewarding course of action. We have an anchor for our soul.

Hebrews 6:19, and 20. One of the most basic needs humans have is security and stability. Only after we know that we can build our lives securely do we really get on with the business of building those lives.

The preacher announces that we have absolute security and absolute stability in Jesus because, as he puts it in 13:8, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. At the opening of the sermon, the preacher declared that earth and heaven will perish, but you remain. They will be changed, but you are the same.

The author has thus effectively bracketed his sermon with contrasts between the reliable foundation for trust upon which to build one's life and unreliable foundations that lead to loss for those who build upon them. Sameness in both of these texts, 1:12 and 13:8, means constancy. It is opposed to changeableness and unreliability.

A Roman orator of the late first and early second century, Dio Chrysostom, provides a very helpful comparative text in the context of an oration of his about distrust, complaining that with human beings, there is no constancy or truthfulness at all. Dio writes that what someone has said about fortune might also be said about human beings, namely that no one knows about anyone whether he will remain as he is until the morrow. People violate the promises they make with each other and give each other different advice and, believing one course to be expedient, end up following another.

The preacher of Hebrews wants his readers to know that they can trust Jesus. Jesus' favor is not here today and gone tomorrow like the favor of unreliable people. Rather, his favor is always present toward his faithful ones, and this becomes the source of stability for the hearts of the believers.

The one who has promised is indeed faithful or reliable. Indeed, Jesus will prove more reliable, a more stable anchor for their hope than anything in all creation. We regularly see evidence that supports the author's suspicion about the unreliability of the things of this world.

In this century, we've seen the economy fluctuate wildly, sometimes elating, sometimes panicking investors. Terrorists have taught us how vulnerable we are in so many ways. Life itself is fragile.

One hurricane can upend hundreds of families' lives. Security, a reliable foundation, an anchor for the soul. The good news is that Jesus will be all these things to us both now and forever.

Taking Jesus' teachings seriously and building our lives around them gives us an unshakable foundation for those lives. In the Book of Common Prayer used by the Episcopal Church, there's a prayer for the fifth Sunday of Lent that has a congregation pray this petition. Grant your people to love what you command and desire what you promise so that among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely be fixed where true joys are to be found.

Jesus is an ultimately reliable foundation, and he has entered into God's realm on our behalf to be that anchor for us there and to fix our hearts where true joys are to be found. We also have access to all the help that we need. The preacher of Hebrews encourages his congregation that God is able to continue to sustain them through their own wilderness experiences and able to equip them to conquer in the face of the world's hostility.

They are not left alone in their struggle. They have far more than a stiff upper lip and personal commitment to get them through. They have access to all the resources and help that the Almighty God can marshal and put at their disposal.

The inner resources of spiritual strength, assurance, and comfort. The external resources of material aid, loving care, and encouragement given by their fellow believers in response to God's mobilization of God's own gifts. There is no challenge to faith so great that God cannot provide the means to endure and to persevere to those who come to God for help rather than shrink back in hopelessness.

Prayer, individual and corporate, is a spiritual discipline whose power and importance cannot be overestimated. The right to come before God and seek favor for timely help is presented as one of the most valuable benefits won for us by Jesus. Jesus is also our source of assurance that God will give us the help we need.

The installation of Jesus as high priest, a major theme of Hebrews, expresses Jesus' ongoing commitment to us and connection with us, always living to intercede on our behalf, as the preacher puts it in chapter 7, verse 25. Jesus lives to keep our access to God and God's help open and secure. When we face difficult choices that test our commitment to God or when we find ourselves betrayed by our own weakness, we have the assurance that Jesus stands alongside us with sympathy rather than a condemning gaze.

We have the assurance that Jesus, who has known the same struggles and found the path to victory, stands ready to help us remain faithful in the face of the tests and temptations that challenge us. So, as the author urges, let us run to the throne of favor whenever these challenges arise and confidently seek the help of someone who has overcome these same temptations and challenges on our behalf. We also have the dignity and the honor of a holy priestly calling.

The preacher helps us to remember what an astonishing privilege it is that we can come before God in worship and prayer at any time, in any place, in any condition, precisely because Jesus has been living at and continues to live at God's right-hand, interceding on our behalf. Christian worship is not a chore but part of our discharge of the honor and the dignity that has been conferred on us by Jesus, who has opened to us the privileges formally reserved for the Levitical priests of the temple and the

Tabernacle alone. Worship and prayer also become a foretaste, in effect, of our final entry into the unshakable realm and the full, unmediated presence of God.

This gives a focus to our times of prayer and worship, not simply as a place where we can find strength for daily life or solutions for temporal needs but also as a portal through which we can begin to see and even experience the end of our journey. Jesus' consecration of the whole people by his own blood also puts an end to leaving religion, prayer, intercession, worship, witness, visitation, and outreach to the ministry professionals. Many congregations may seek comfort in reaffirming the lines that separate priests from lay persons, relieving themselves of the calling that Jesus has laid upon them.

But if the limitation of access to God and to the holy places under the old covenant rights was an imperfect state of affairs overcome at such cost to Jesus, we need to take care that we, as the people of the new covenant, do not fashion our religious life after the pattern of the earthly sanctuary, the old covenant temple and tabernacle. An important facet of the gospel in this text is that every believer, not only those Christians set apart for full-time ministry, has been given the unparalleled honor of coming before God's own self at any time and the honor of carrying out the service that God has appointed for him or for her. Every Christian's whole life can be set apart as holy for service to God through witness, worship, and acts of love and sharing.

These are the well-pleasing sacrifices that each one of us is called up to offer before God at the close of this sermon in Hebrews 13, verses 15 and 16. The third word that Hebrews perpetually proclaims is this: don't lose sight of what is due God. We are generally a selfish lot.

We think a lot about what is due us, about getting what we want. This instinctive bent towards self is at the root of our bent towards sinning, at the root of the double-mindedness that makes us limp along in our discipleship rather than run the race with perseverance, having laid aside every burden, every encumbrance that could slow us down. And so, the preacher of Hebrews offers his two-part remedy.

Regarding all those things that we want, the pursuit of which draws us away from progress in our race toward Christlikeness and toward being at home with God, the preacher reminds us of all those things that we already have. We've already covered that in our preceding section. Regarding our concern about getting our due, about self-gratification and self-fulfillment, or even about gratifying those around us whose approval and acceptance we seek, the preacher also reminds us of what is due God and tells us to keep that first and foremost in our minds before our eyes.

The counterpart in Hebrews to all the since we have that we just finished exploring is the let us have. Let us have gratitude. Hebrews 12 verse 28.

As we become more aware and help our fellow believers become more aware of the astounding generosity that God has lavished upon us in Christ, our awareness of the gravity of properly valuing and responding to that generosity to the word spoken in the sun also increases. Theology and ethics, belief and response, creed and Christian life are held together and mutually energized in the author's words about the grace relationship initiated by Christ and about the disciple's obligation to value this relationship enough to do whatever it takes to pay whatever price it involves in order to remain loyal and obedient to God in Christ. The connection between grace and response is the joint, the hinge between theology and ethics.

The author invokes the experience of God's generosity and kindness as the context for making ethical choices. While our author has in mind a particular challenge facing the congregation, the canonical status of his sermon holds the question before disciples in all situations. What is the course of action in this situation that will most fully witness my appreciation for God's favor shown me and offer the return to God that would be most pleasing to him, most in keeping with the purposes inherent in my redemption? Half-hearted attention to this relationship, while we pour our lives into temporary pleasures and goods, is as much an affront to our great benefactor as open apostasy would be and, thus, every bit as dangerous.

This connection between grace and response is also the joint, the hinge between love for God and love for neighbor since the author of Hebrews directs this flow of gratitude toward acts of love and service for one's fellow believers. God stands in need of nothing, and so God's benefits to us call us to bear the fruits of gratitude to those whom God has designated, just as in the author's analogy in chapter 6, verses 7 and 8, just as the rain is given from above so that the land will bear vegetation for the farmers and for others dependent on the land, not for the rain giver. Indeed, if we want assurance about our standing with God, the preacher of Hebrews directs us toward our investment in one another.

In Hebrews 6 verse 10, it is your work and your love which you showed in God's name serving and continuing to serve the saints that the just God will not forget, giving the author at least assurance that the better things that hold salvation will be the lot of his own congregation. Talking about grace in these first-century terms messes with our theological baggage, particularly that oversized bag of being saved by faith versus being saved by works or being saved by grace versus by works. Free grace does not mean our freedom not to respond to the gifts we receive from God with the heart, with speech, and with actions of gratitude appropriate to the generosity of God and the value of God's gifts.

As we preach grace in Hebrews, we force ourselves and our congregations to perceive the unity, the beauty, the fluidity of the dance that God has initiated with us and by means of which God seeks to transform each person, each community of

faith, and eventually the cosmos as a whole. The emphasis throughout the New Testament on grace and response binds justification and sanctification, belief, and discipleship seamlessly together. The Apostle Paul's formulations on this subject are quite pointed and demanding.

In 2 Corinthians 5:15, he writes, Christ died for all so that those who continue living might live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised on their behalf. Paul's passion was clearly to stimulate a response of love for love, life for life to the grace of God shown forth in Jesus and his self-giving death. A life of obedience to Jesus' teachings and the Apostle's admonitions and transformation into Christ's likeness, in short, a life of bearing good fruit, is not offered to win God's favor but must be offered as a grateful response to God's favor.

A focus on grace and response leads ultimately to a fuller understanding of what it means to be saved and justified by grace. As we let God's favor and gifts have their full effect in us, stimulating a grateful, God-directed response, our lives are transformed from the inside out as we are more and more directed by gratitude toward God than by seeking fulfillment of the self. When God's grace has had its full way with us, we will stand before God and the Lamb, reflecting Christ's being from within, full of fruit to offer the master and concerning which to receive his kind commendation.

Our wayward hearts have been made steadfast by becoming God-directed again and again by becoming mindful of God's benefits and the faithfulness and loyalty those gifts provoke in us. That is what it means for the heart to be made secure or firm by grace, as the author of Hebrews declares in chapter 13, verse 9. The author of Hebrews, like the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is allergic to preaching cheap grace or, perhaps better, cheap gratitude. Preaching in that way does not do our congregations any good service.

Preaching Hebrews challenges us to provide our congregations with opportunities to respond honorably to God with our service and our obedience, to know truly the sublime attitude of gratitude by enacting a grateful response, and to discover the nobility, the self-respect, the sense of Christian integrity which can come from responding to God's generosity with a full heart. Letting this gratitude toward God grow within us, allowing this gratitude to shape our lives, promises to bring integration to all that we do and all that we experience. All parts of our lives come together in a reflection of that beautiful circle dance of the graces as we walk in the awareness of receiving from God and returning thanks to God through our reverence and service and our sharing of what God has given us with one another.

And the fourth word that the author of Hebrews would not have us overlook but attend to fully is this, don't lose sight of one another. This word brings us to another vital resource that God has given us so that we may run the race with perseverance

and arrive at its goal, and that resource is each other. The author of Hebrews knew how important it is for us to invest ourselves in each other, making the church a community of support, encouragement, and accountability.

Only in this way will we ourselves have the necessary support to mature as disciples. All of us and all of the people in our congregations are partners with Christ and partners in a heavenly calling, challenged to look after one another as partners, struggling forward together. We are not only to watch out against the inroads of distrust in our own hearts but also to watch out lest distrust make inroads into the hearts of our fellow disciples in chapter three, verse 12.

We are all told to be afraid lest any one of us think it right to stop short of God's promised goal in chapter four, verse one. We are all to work to ensure that every one of our sisters and brothers keeps their hearts fixed on the prize that is given to faithful obedience so that no one falls short of God's favor in Hebrews 12:15. Against the flood of other messages from our neighbors, we are to reinforce each other's commitment to the way of Christ, supporting one another with acts of love and sharing.

We inherit both the benefits and the responsibilities of family, owing to one another encouragement, support, and help on the road to perfection, even as we receive this encouragement, support, and help from our fellow disciples at our own points of need and failure. The preacher challenges the modern cultural lie that religion is a private matter. Our spiritual struggles are the business of our sisters and brothers in Christ, and we, in turn, owe them the favor of offering our own gifts of encouragement, warning, and support.

We need one another's help if our own eyes and minds are to remain fixed where true joys are to be found. John Wesley's class meetings were an admirable experiment in this vein, bringing together small bands of committed believers who helped one another remain true to the commitments that they had set for themselves, encouraging one another to love what God commanded and to desire what God promised above all temporal distractions and frequently in the midst of criticism from outsiders. The emergence of small group ministries in many churches or accountability groups formed in conjunction with parachurch ministries, in many ways, provides precisely the same sort of support, focus, and assistance that the author of Hebrews sets before us as a necessity for completing our race.

This is also a way in which the practice of hospitality remains a vital need in our churches as we open up our homes as venues for spiritual growth and support and as a base for missions and outreach. There are many ways in which each parishioner can make an important contribution to another's ability to hold on to God in the midst of hardship, temptation, or just plain distraction. Many Christians are slow to

speak about the traces of God's hand in their lives, but in each one of us, God has written a testimony to God's goodness, reliability, and dependability.

This testimony is not written only for the individual's benefit but also for the encouragement of others. How can we challenge our congregations to nurture an atmosphere that encourages reflection on and sharing of those traces of God's favor in our midst? And we are challenged to challenge them to go further, working to counteract the beguiling and ever-present voice of sin. The problem with being beguiled is that we cannot work our own way back to a clear way of thinking.

At some point in our walk, we will need a sister or a brother to help us see sin for what it is, and so we are called to offer this gift to one another as well. When a sister or a brother is in danger of throwing away the integrity of his or her walk and eternal rewards for the temporary pleasure of sin, we can help that sister or brother recover his or her vision, just as we will need such assistance at some point in our own walk as well. The preacher of Hebrews calls our attention to those sisters and brothers whom society has most targeted as deviants.

This comes out especially in 10, verses 32 to 34, and in chapter 13, verse 3. Only the congregation that is willing to support its members with sibling love, resources, and prayer under such conditions can maintain the loyalty and trust of its adherents and show that society's court of opinion is not, after all, the final adjudicatory of someone's worth. This challenge takes on new urgency and meaning as Western churches become aware of the needs of our sisters and brothers worldwide, especially in countries where Christianity is a restricted religion, and as the means at our disposal to encourage and support them increase. As we grow to think globally in so many areas, our definition of church and family of God needs to grow as well.

Some action steps in this area are straightforward. Take the time to learn about the plight of our Christian sisters and brothers in other nations. Shatter the silence in our own country.

Raise public awareness of religious persecution. Pray. Make relief of persecuted Christians and the families that martyrs leave behind part of the mission and relief work of your congregation.

Three decades ago, a former colleague of mine at Ashland Theological Seminary committed herself to regular personal contact with one missionary in Nigeria, communicating mostly through email. In this way, she was able to serve as a resource person to a minister in an area where converts to Christianity had been facing brutal persecution. She was able to pray specifically for the needs of those converts as they arose, to provide encouragement to this minister, and to be available to hear specific needs and coordinate efforts to meet those needs whenever help like public voice or material resources from outside was required.

No single Christian would, by these means, eliminate persecution of Christians in the world, but if each of our congregations would commit to helping a single Christian community facing persecution somewhere in the world, whether through a missionary, a contact from that community, for example, an international student returning home, a tremendous first step will have been taken. The author of Hebrews perceived that people will risk according to their resources. If an individual Christian knows that the other members of a church are fully committed to seeking his or her well-being, would that believer not be able to risk the level of honesty and openness that allows deep personal and spiritual growth to occur? And knowing that the resources of a whole body of believers stand behind him or her, what vital ministries might he or she be enabled to pioneer? What bold outreach in the name of the faith.

As we run the race set before us, we don't run in competition with other believers. We do not run in our own little lanes marked off from the lanes of others. We run together, hand in hand, leaning down to lift up those who stumble, raising our hands to one another when we trip, helping to support the injured, putting our arms over one another's shoulders.

In this race, it is the will of the master of the games that all who have started to finish and finish well.