

Reading Hebrews — Attune to Patronage and Reciprocity

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. David deSilva examines the Letter to the Hebrews through the Greco-Roman cultural lens of patronage and reciprocity, reframing the text as a sermon designed to motivate a struggling Christian community. He presents God as the supreme benefactor and Jesus as the essential broker who have bestowed costly, unprecedented gifts upon believers. To encourage perseverance amid social shaming and marginalization, the author invokes ancient reciprocity scripts, demonstrating that divine favor demands a return of loyalty, public witness, and mutual support. Conversely, deSilva shows how Hebrews uses severe warnings against apostasy and ingratitude to warn against the shame and danger of turning away from such a generous benefactor.

Outline

I. Introduction: Reading Hebrews through the lens of Patronage, Friendship, and Reciprocity

- A. Genre of Hebrews: Resembles a sermon rather than a typical Pauline letter
 - 1. Sonorous and artistic opening rather than epistolary greeting
 - 2. Focuses on speaking and hearing until the very end, which closes like a letter
- B. Thematic Focus: God's favor and grace are central themes, not just closing greetings

II. God as the Supreme Benefactor and Patron

- A. Christ's Incarnation and Death (Hebrews 2:9)
 - 1. Manifestation of God's desire to benefit humanity
 - 2. Jesus tasting death for everyone by the grace of God
- B. Constant Access to Divine Help and Mercy (Hebrews 4:16)
 - 1. Believers are urged to draw near to the "throne of grace" with confidence
 - 2. The throne as an unfailing fountain of assistance in times of need
- C. Rich Bestowal of Spiritual and Heavenly Gifts (Hebrews 6:4-5)
 - 1. Experience of being enlightened
 - 2. Tasting of the heavenly gift

3. Receiving a share of the Holy Spirit
 4. Tasting the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come
- D. The Promise of Future Divine Benefactions
1. Entry into God's place of rest (Hebrews 4:1)
 2. A heavenly homeland (Hebrews 11:16)
 3. An abiding city (Hebrews 13:14)
 4. An unshakable kingdom (Hebrews 12:28)
 5. Entry into heaven itself (Hebrews 9:24)
 6. Better and lasting possessions in the abiding realm (Hebrews 10:34)

III. Jesus as Benefactor, Helper, and Broker

- A. Jesus as Benefactor
1. Giving his life to redeem and restore the disciples (Hebrews 2:9)
 2. Consecrating the people through his own blood outside the gate (Hebrews 13:12)
 3. Costliness of the Son's favor toward the hearers
- B. Jesus as Sympathetic Helper (Hebrews 2:16-18)
1. Assisting the offspring of Abraham rather than angels
 2. Made like his brothers in every respect to become a merciful and faithful high priest
 3. Suffered and tempted, making him able to help those currently facing temptation
 4. Bestowing freedom from the fear of death and deliverance from lifelong slavery (Hebrews 2:14-15)
- C. Jesus as the Ultimate Broker (Pontifex / Bridge Builder)
1. Mediating between God the Father and humanity
 2. Sympathetic High Priest: understands human weakness and temptation, yet stands sinless and unblemished before God (Hebrews 4:14-16)
 3. Saving "to the uttermost" those who draw near to God through him (Hebrews 7:25)
 4. Incessant intercession on behalf of believers
 5. Repair of the broken relationship, allowing believers to stand before God in expectation of favor rather than wrath (Hebrews 7:1-10:25)

IV. The Reciprocity Script and the Obligation of Gratitude

- A. The Social "Reciprocity Script" of the Ancient Greco-Roman World
1. Great benefits dictate an obligatory response of gratitude and loyalty
 2. Gratitude (echomen kharen) as the basis for acceptable service to God (Hebrews 12:28)
- B. The Call to Active Response (Hebrews 10:19-23)
1. The boldness to enter the holy places through the blood of Jesus

2. Re-enacting the reciprocity script: drawing closer and holding fast to confession without wavering

V. The Social Challenges and Context of the Audience

A. Profile of the Community

1. Converted through gospel preaching and confirmed by the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 2:3-4)
2. Carefully socialized via a foundational catechism of repentance, faith, and judgment (Hebrews 6:1-2)

B. Past History of Persecution and Hostility (Hebrews 10:32-34)

1. Hard contest with suffering after initial enlightenment
2. Public exposure to shaming, reproaches, and afflictions
3. Active solidarity with imprisoned believers
4. Joyful acceptance of the seizure of personal property, looking to lasting possessions

C. The Threat of Social Pressure and Shaming

1. Shaming and public disgrace as primary ancient methods of social control
2. Community's temptation to avoid marginalization by withdrawing from open association
3. Some members already abandoning the assembly (Hebrews 10:24-25)
4. The widespread danger of drifting away, neglecting salvation, and distrusting the living God (Hebrews 2:1-3, 3:12, 12:3)

VI. Summons to a Grateful Response and Public Loyalty

A. Bearing Witness and Bringing Honor to the Patron

1. Openly demonstrating association with God and Jesus, refusing to be cowed by neighbors
2. Parousia (Boldness) defined: speaking one's mind, giving voice to convictions, a democratic and heroic virtue (Hebrews 10:35)
3. Maintaining solidarity with targeted Christians, despite painting a target on one's own back

B. Following Christ "Outside the Camp"

1. Gathering publicly with the circle of God's clients (Hebrews 10:24-25)
2. Going outside the camp to share in Christ's social disgrace (Hebrews 13:13-14)
3. Re-enacting reciprocity: Jesus gave away his social honor on the cross; believers owe him their status in return

C. The Logic of Suffering (Hebrews 12:3-4)

1. Comparing the believer's struggles to Christ's resistance of hostility to the point of bloodshed
2. To give up before matching his sacrifice would be shameful and disloyal

D. Trust in the Reliable Benefactor

1. Warning against the wicked, distrustful heart (Hebrews 3:12)
 2. Remaining confident in God's reliability to deliver promised future benefits (Hebrews 10:23)
 3. Imitating the patient trust of historical heroes of faith (Hebrews 11)
 - a. Abraham becoming a sojourner, leaving his established life in Ur
 - b. Moses leaving Pharaoh's palace to share the ill-treatment of God's people
 4. The immutability of Jesus (Hebrews 13:8): "same yesterday, today, and forever" as a statement of relational reliability and trustworthiness
- E. Practical Forms of Grateful Return (Service to Others)
1. Offerings of praise: the fruit of lips professing God's name (Hebrews 13:15)
 2. Doing good and sharing resources with those in need as sacrifices pleasing to God (Hebrews 13:16)
 3. Mutual investment and assistance: God is not unjust to overlook service shown to his name (Hebrews 6:10, 10:19-24)

VII. Severe Warnings Against Ingratitude and Falling Away

- A. The Exodus Generation as a Warning Example (Hebrews 3:7-4:11)
1. Abundant divine benefactions: plagues, parting of the Red Sea, manna, quail, and water
 2. The failure of trust at the threshold of the promised land due to fear of the Canaanites
 3. God's response in Numbers 14 as an affronted benefactor who swears in his wrath to exclude them
- B. Reframing Defection as Insult and Abuse (Hebrews 10:26-31)
1. "Sinning willfully" defined as abandoning the assembly due to social pressure to regain status
 2. The severity of apostasy: "trampling" on God's Son, treating sanctifying blood as ordinary, and insulting the Spirit of grace
 3. Reframing a seemingly sensible escape from social pressure as an egregious personal slap in the face of God
- C. Pressing On vs. Falling Away (Hebrews 6:1-8)
1. The proposal: leaving foundational principles to press on to the end point of the journey (Hebrews 6:1)
 2. Argument from the contrary: the impossibility of restoring those who fall away after experiencing immense divine gifts (Hebrews 6:4-6)
 3. Holding Jesus up to public disgrace and "crucifying him afresh"
 4. Agricultural Analogy (Hebrews 6:7-8):
 - a. Good ground that drinks rain and bears useful vegetation receives a blessing
 - b. Bad ground that bears thorns and thistles is proven worthless and burned

5. Seneca's agricultural analogies regarding seeds, soil, and cultivation in ancient patronage
6. Reassurance of the audience's good soil based on past works of love (Hebrews 6:9-12)

VIII. Theological Interpretations and the Ethos of Grace

- A. Misapplying Ancient Grace: Eternal Security vs. Unpardonable Sin
 1. Theological debates often ask the wrong questions, violating the ancient ethos of grace
 2. Conflicting rules governing givers and recipients (Seneca's paradox of benefits):
 - a. The giver must forget the benefit; the recipient must never forget
 - b. The giver should release the other; the recipient should feel bound
 - c. The recipient must never presume upon the giver's generosity
- B. The Errors of the Two Positions
 1. Eternal Security: teaches recipients to presume on what the giver will do rather than focusing on their fitting response
 2. Unpardonable Sin: presumes what the giver will not do, limiting the unrestricted generosity of a noble benefactor
- C. Conclusion: Grace Must Answer Grace
 1. The "dance of grace" as an unbreakable bond between divine favor and ethical response
 2. God's lavish favor (reconciliation, reinstatement, adoption) arouses love and transformation
 3. The driving question of discipleship: how to live for the one who gave his life (2 Corinthians 5:15, Galatians 2:20)