

The Church's Legacy

Hebrews 13:7-8

Halifax: 26 May 2024

Introduction:

God has given us so much in His precious word.

- Today we come to sermon number 77 on the epistle to the Hebrews.
- In this book we have seen the superlative excellence of Jesus Christ which is set forth to us in the first ten chapters.
 - He is the very Son of God who by Himself purged our sins by offering Himself as the only acceptable sacrifice.
 - God sent Him to do this, and He did it very well.

In chapters 10 & 11, we are exhorted to trust in Him as the way of reconciliation with God.

- In chapters 12 & 13, we are exhorted and instructed about how to continue with Him.
 - We are told to endure to the end as runners in a race.
 - We are to run with the church—helping each other to continue in Christ, and to live in a way that is appropriate for those who are reconciled to God and headed for His house in glory where we will dwell with Him forever.
- Chapter 13 began with the call to “let brotherly love continue.”
 - Today we come to vv. 7 & 8 where we are called to love those who led us in the past...

I will read our text and we will consider how it speaks into our lives as Christian pilgrims.

- The text is Hebrews 13:7-8. May God bless His holy and infallible word:

Heb 13:7-8: Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Thanks be to God for His Word.

I. As God's people we are to remember those who led us in the past.

A. God has raised up men to lead His church from the very start.

1. In our translation, they are called: “those who rule over you.”
 - But many translations see it as referring to the past and translate it the way the New American Standard Bible translates it: “Remember those who led you.”
 - Commentators generally understand it as referring to leaders of the church who have already finished their race—they have gone to be with the Lord, because we are told that they “have spoken” the word (rather than ‘are speaking’ it) and we are told to consider the outcome of their conduct.
 - Besides that, in Hebrews 13:17, we are instructed about how to respond to those who are still presently ruling us.
 - So I am in agreement with those who take this as those who are now in glory.

2. One thing that stands out, especially to a modern audience is the way they are called “those who rule.”
 - Today, we tend to be especially uncomfortable with anyone having authority over other people.
 - The Bible recognises that problem and addresses it strongly.
 - God has appointed some to rule over others in every aspect of life. There is authority and submission in the home; men are to lead, in the church, as here, elders are to lead; in the magistrate, where rulers are to be obeyed.
 - Our Lord addresses both the rulers and the ruled, teaching those who rule to do so with love and under strict submission to the Lord; and teaching those who are ruled to submit and obey—to respect those who are over them in the Lord.
 - Christians are to stand out in how they do this.
 - Leaders are to sacrificially lay down their lives and those who follow them are to exhibit eagerness to please them.
 - We will be looking at this more when we get to verse 17.
 - But suffice it to say that the LORD has appointed that there be some in the church who are appointed to lead and guide others.
 - They are called overseers (or bishops) or elders who teach and rule. They are the same persons—the elders are all bishops and in the church, there are always supposed to be a plurality of them.
3. These men were and are given a tremendous responsibility that they must exercise very carefully.
 - They must stick to God’s word without wavering or deviating from it in any way. They must teach and command not in their own name, but in the name of the LORD. They will be judged by Him.
 - People should lead in a way that makes godly people who want to please the Lord glad that they are leading.

B. We have a rich heritage in the church. We are not just one generation deep.

1. At the foundation are the apostles and the prophets.
 - These are the men who were given the ability to speak the holy word of God for Him.
 - They were confirmed with signs and wonders to show that God sent them.
 - If anyone pretended to speak for God and gave prophecies that were false, they were to be utterly rejected.
 - The apostles are the highest ones of all because they were the ones who saw Jesus and who testified to us of Him.
 - They were eye-witnesses of His life and work, of His death and His resurrection, and God enabled them to convey what they saw and heard to us without any error whatsoever.
 - They not only told us what they saw and heard, but they also declared to us what it meant—for example, they told us that Jesus’s death was to atone for our sins so that we can be fully forgiven through faith in Him.

- If they had not told us this, we would have known that He died, but would have no idea why.
- The prophets are like them in that they too were given the ability to proclaim God's word to us.
 - Their office is not as great as that of the apostles because they did not get to accompany Jesus, but the words they gave us which are recorded in Scripture are equal in authority with those of the apostles because they also spoke the word of God to us.
 - The whole church is built on Jesus Christ, but it is also said to be built on the apostles and prophets because it is through them that we are told about the Lord and are given His commandments and promises.
 - These are all found in the Bible now. God's revelation about Jesus and His gracious work and instruction is complete.
- These apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the church.
 - We must receive their words as the word of God and continue in them or we cannot be true disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - He Himself declared that if we will not hear them, we are refusing to hear Him.
 - These apostles and prophets gave us the foundation.
 - Their task was to establish the church, instruct her, and give her God's word.
 - But God saw fit in His plan that we should have others in the church who would guide us in receiving and following their teachings.
- 2. So the LORD has also provided a continued succession of officers in the church to rule over us.
 - He gives them to each generation.
 - They are called elders or bishops (overseers). They include ministers who preach the word, as well as ruling elders who govern the church by the word.
 - Their task is not to give us new doctrine or new prophecies, but to faithfully proclaim to us the word of the apostles and prophets contained in the scriptures.
 - Anyone who claims to have new doctrine given to him today is a false teacher and should be rejected by the church.
 - These officers are also to govern or rule by the word of God.
 - If they start to enforce their own commands or to preach their own ideas that are not based on God's Word, they should be rebuked and if they persist, removed.
- 3. As mentioned before—when we come to verse 17, we will speak about living elders, but here we are especially instructed to remember those who have gone before and been faithful.

- Those who have gone before are often not remembered in the way they should be. So let's take this teaching to heart and look at how it we ought to go about obeying it.

II. In what way does God want us to remember those leaders in the church who have gone before us?

- Remembering our leaders from the past has often been done wrongly.
- Since this is so, we will first look at two things that remembering them does not mean—then we will look at what it does mean.

A. First, He has not called us venerate them or to look upon them as mediators.

1. There has often been a tendency in the world to worship men—especially great men—who have gone before us.
 - This was a common practice among worshippers of false gods and idol worshippers in all ages.
 - They look to departed fathers of their people to guide them and to deliver them, attributing to them powers that God has not conveyed to them.
 - When this is persisted in, demons will sometimes use it to jump in and influence these ancestor worshippers.
 - Sadly, where this was such a common practice, some in the church began to venerate saints from the past in this way.
 - This becomes a great snare and distraction, leading them away from looking to Jesus who is the only Saviour and only mediator between us and God.
 - This practice was not ordained by God, so it is not approved by Him.
 - And when it is done, it leads to much superstition and error.
2. Along with this inappropriate veneration, there has been an acceptance of man-made traditions in worship and doctrine.
 - In Jesus' day, it was called "keeping the traditions of the fathers."
 - Jesus pointed out that when this is done it has a terrible effect.
 - It seems to always cause the worshippers to set aside God's actual commandments and elevate these man-made traditions.
 - Because we are sinful beings, we will tend to value human traditions more than God-given commandments.
 - Also, it divides the church, as is shown by the way that even Jesus and His disciples were often accused and rejected for not keeping the "traditions of the fathers."
3. The faithful fathers of our faith are not the ones who follow or introduce the traditions of men. They are the ones who keep the traditions of the apostles that God gave them. These are the practices which we find in God's Word.
 - The Bible is sufficient.
 - If a practice cannot be found there, it should not be done.
 - The question is not whether we like certain traditions that churches have sometimes observed, but whether they were appointed by God.

- We are commanded not to add or to take away from what He has commanded us to do, and we are to emphasise what is emphasised in the word.
 - Passion plays, burning of incense, bowing to the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, holy days besides the sabbath, washings in addition to baptism, prayers to the saints, and any other additions are not to be tolerated.
- Where these things have been emphasised, it has not gone well. The gospel has often been buried under these ceremonies, and the ordinances that God has commanded (like preaching, observing the Lord's Day, or the Lord's supper) have been neglected or twisted beyond recognition.
 - Only the LORD, speaking through His apostles and prophets, has the authority to institute worship and to give us doctrine.

TRANS> So venerating our fathers in the faith or following traditions that they erroneously made up is not what remembering them entails.

- But there is the opposite error that occurs. We will look at that now.

B. The opposite error is to ignore those that have faithfully led the church through the ages—to forget them and act as if we are the first to receive the word of God.

1. This includes those who look at the traditions established in the word of God by the apostles and prophets as dispensable.

- They see them as outmoded and no longer useful to us.
- a. Those who are the worst transgressors in this will change doctrine to suit our modern times—when we became rationalistic, they were happy to reject miracles, to say it was not possible that Jonah was swallowed by a fish and still lived.
 - Large groups of ministers said that it was not necessary to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin or resurrected from the dead and signed on to a document to say so.
 - They said that the important thing was to draw the spiritual meaning from these stories.
 - Interestingly, these same men denied the spiritual meaning that God gave us—such as that by the cross of Jesus our sins are forgiven—
 - They assigned to the cross their own meaning—that it is not an atonement for sin because God does not punish sin in an enlightened age—they said it was just showing devotion to a cause.
 - These will also embrace wicked practices that are clearly condemned in God's word—such as abortion, or sex outside of marriage, or same sex encounters.
 - They do not remember the fathers of the church—no, not even the apostles and prophets who spoke the word of God.

b. There are also lesser versions of this error.

- Lesser versions of this would include those who would replace preaching by a multimedia presentation, or by an interview with a celebrity.

- And who would reject what the Bible says about men being responsible before God to lead their homes, and that only men are to serve as elders and ministers in the church.
2. But there is also an issue for those who have a high view of scripture and the apostles and prophets, but who do not value the leaders of the church who came after the apostles.
- They do not regard the creeds and confessions that these faithful leaders developed to address the errors and heresies that arose.
 - They do not benefit from those that God has raised up to defend the truth through the ages.
 - Those who hold this error say that they have no use of the creeds and confessions of men—that they go by the Bible alone.
 - The problem is that there have been all kinds of heresies that have arisen that have been addressed by faithful men who also firmly held that the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice.
 - They faithfully dealt with heresies in their day, and each successive generation that has properly remembered them has accepted their work (embracing the creeds that are true to the word), and then dealt with new issues that arose in their day.
 - The men who wrote the Westminster Standards which, we have as our summation of what the Scriptures teach, did not start from scratch.
 - In fact, they were of such a mind that if any of their teachings had been contrary to faithful men who were also basing their doctrine on scripture alone from the past, they would have been very reluctant to set such a teaching forth.
 - They had some relatively new heresies to deal with, such as whether there was a visible head of the church on earth, but for a doctrine such as the Trinity or the sovereignty of God in salvation, they drew heavily upon those who had dealt with those issues in the past.
- C. Our text shows us how the LORD wants us to remember those faithful leaders who have gone before us.
1. First, that we are to follow their faith as those who spoke the word to us.
- When we see clearly that they have faithfully taught us the word, we should embrace the teaching with all diligence and thanksgiving.
- a. With thanksgiving because we see that God has been pleased to use them to bring the word to us so we could know God and live for Him.
- He might have left us in the dark, but instead, He has given us faithful teachers.
 - We are ungrateful wretches if we do not appreciate what He has done.
- b. Diligently following their faith means that we both believe and practice what they taught and lived.
- If you say you believe it, but do not practice it, you are lying and you are especially culpable.

- Why especially so? Because God gave you good doctrine and you did not appreciate it.
 - Jesus was very unhappy with those before whom He had taught and lived who did not receive His teaching.
 - He often pointed to Gentiles who were more receptive than those in Israel who professed to know God.
 - He told the cities where He had laboured the most that it would be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for them—because if Sodom had seen all that they had seen, they would have repented long ago.
- So the first thing is that we are to follow the faith of those who led us.
2. Second, that we are to consider the outcome of their faith.
- a. Like Jesus Himself, many of them were rejected in their day, even by the majority of the professing church; and many of them suffered and died for what they believed and taught.
 - Perhaps someone would say, “Why would we follow anyone whose faith led to such a terrible result?”
 - What we see is that they were faithful to the end—and that even though they were not widely appreciated in their day, future generations began to see the value of their teaching and life.
 - Was it not that way for virtually all of the prophets and apostles?
 - They had false prophets among them that were much more popular, but it was the ministry of those who spoke the truth that ended up being received as scripture by the faithful generations that followed them.
 - b. What we see in them is that their faith produced what our Lord delights in the most.
 - It produced in them such a love for Him that they were willing to serve Him with diligence and faithfulness and to defend His cause despite all kinds of opposition.
 - Remember that love is the thing that our Lord wants most of all in His disciples.
 - Did He not tell us that the greatest of all the commandments is to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?
 - He wants us to love Him so much that we live entirely to please Him.
 - Think of what we learned when we studied the Song of Solomon.
 - He is overcome by one look of our eyes as His bride.
 - It delights Him and makes Him sing when He sees the least drop of true affection for Him as our Lord and our God because it is love in a heart that, but for His gracious work, would be cold and hard.
 - It shows that there is new life in that soul that will not stop growing until it reaches perfection.

- When we see strong degrees of such love in those who have gone before us, it should both delight us and inspire us to follow their example of faith.
 - We see this love in the apostles and we see it in the martyrs and their companions in the early church.
 - We see it in the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers who would not allow Christ to be regarded as less than fully divine.
 - We see it in the missionaries of the middle ages who went to rough people in far away lands and preached the gospel to them.
 - We see it in Wycliffe and Huss and their companions who stood up against the heresies that were starting to grow up in the church—denying the very gospel of our salvation and putting it in the hands of human priests and prelates.
 - We see it in the Reformers like Luther and Calvin who restored apostolic doctrine and godliness in the church despite much opposition and suffering.
 - We see it in the Covenanters and the Westminster Divines who continued to serve the LORD faithfully despite political opposition, and who had warm doctrine that was full of grace and love.
 - We see it in the great missionary enterprises of the 19th century.
 - We see it at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century in those who stood alone against the assault of the modernists and the neo-orthodox who took over the churches that had forgotten their reformed heritage and drove these men out of their institutions and church courts for adhering to the scriptures as the word of God.
 - And in our day we see it in those who oppose that assault on biblical morality regarding chastity, sabbath observance, biblical worship, and the rejection of God’s authority in the civil sphere.

TRANS> What marvellous examples we have from those that God has raised up to lead us in speaking the word of God to us.

- Remember them. Follow their faith. And consider the outcome of their lives—they died with faithfulness to God and ardent love for Him.

III. Know, brothers and sisters, that you have the same Saviour that these men had.

A. It is easy to look back at the faithful who lived in days gone by and to suppose that our day is incapable of producing such men.

1. We look around us and we see very little faithfulness, very little godliness.
 - We may ask God, at times, if He has forgotten to be faithful—and where have His mercies gone to His people?
2. There is a rightness in humbling ourselves.
 - We see all the problems and all the warts in our own day.
 - So did these men.

- And I truly believe that here in North America today, the church is in a particularly low time. There certainly are periods of decline.
- B. But in verse 8, we are given words of tremendous encouragement that ought to raise our hopes to the skies! They are very simple words:
- **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.**
1. We have the very same Saviour that the apostles, the martyrs, the reformers, and some of the men of strong faith in the generation before us had.
 - He is the one who worked in them and caused strong doctrine and ardent love grow up in them.
 - He who worked in them is just as capable of working in us.
 - He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever!
 2. He is Jesus Christ.
 - a. He is named Jesus (Jehovah saves) because He saves His people from their sin.
 - Every man that He has ever blessed has been a man that if he had been left to himself would have been no more than a wretched worthless wicked sinner!
 - We should ask Him to carry out His powerful saving work in us—that He might carry it out to the extent that He has in those we remember who have gone before us!
 - Ask Him to raise up men like that today.
 - Ask Him to look down from heaven upon us and pour out His Spirit on our needy souls that He might be exalted and glorified in us.
 - He is the same Jesus, yesterday, today, and forever.
 - b. His title, Christ, means anointed one—the Messiah.
 - As such, He the one who was set apart as our prophet, priest, and king.
 - Each week, we seem to come back to this great theme of Hebrews—His surpassing excellence as the one who is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God by Him.
 - As our prophet, He has made God known to us. He not only reveals the glorious truth of who God is by His life and teaching, but He also actually opens our eyes to see the truth and He gives us new hearts to love and embrace God and His truth.
 - As our priest, He has offered the only sacrifice that can take away our sin, and He ever lives to make intercession for us. He is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.
 - And as our anointed king, He is able to bring God’s rule, and will indeed bring the whole church under complete obedience to Him.
 - He not only enforces His law, but by His Spirit, He writes it in our hearts and enables us to walk in obedience.
- Yes! He is Jesus Christ. The same yesterday, today, and forever.

- C. What hope is here for us not only in the present, but also for the future.
1. We might look at the future and wonder what will become of our children.
 - The world and the church seem to be going in such a bad direction—which may be true enough—like it was in Daniel’s day when the whole church went into exile and the temple was destroyed because of the church’s unfaithfulness.
 - But the same God who upheld Daniel in those days and then restored His people and at last brought forth Christ is at work in us today.
 - We have every reason to bear children and train them up in hope.
 - But there is more hope than that.
 2. Did you notice that it does not say, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow—as you might expect... but it says “yesterday, today, and *forever*.”
 - We need to remember and be assured that He will bring about His ultimate purpose concerning His church.
 - It is this world in its rebellion that is only temporary. It is the god of this world and those who follow him who will ultimately perish.
 - Christ will be with His church to the end, and He will bring her to fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.
 - Not one promise will fail.

Conclusion: Christian, take heart!

- Our mighty Lord Jesus Christ raised up His church from the ruins into which it had fallen when He came.
 - It was in such a terrible state that it officially rejected Him and demanded that He be crucified.
 - Out of those ruins, He raised up faithful men to carry His gospel into the all the world. He has sustained His church from generation unto generation, and He will continue to sustain it now.
 - He will work mightily in us if we will look to Him in faith the way our faithful fathers have!
 - Praise be to His name.