

The Perfect Response

Hebrews 12:28—13:6

Laura Anderson ~ Faith Presbyterian Church ~ September 3, 2023



²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

¹ Let mutual love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” ⁶ So we can say with confidence,

“The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?”

(Hebrews 12:28 – 13:6, NRSV)



Back when I was in my late teens, I spent two summers in French-speaking Belgium serving with United World Mission as a short-term missionary. A bunch of college students from the U.S. and Canada took part, and our job was to support the small, local, evangelical churches as they did a series of week-long evangelistic campaigns designed to introduce Belgians to the good news of Jesus. We distributed flyers, helped with kids ministry, played soccer with the local youth, shared our testimonies, hosted coffee and game nights at the churches, and conducted short, door-to-door questionnaires to try to spark gospel-based conversations. I remember one day another girl and I were talking with a man who was working in his garden. We tried to engage him using the survey questions, but he wasn't much interested. Still, I plowed on. Finally, he looked at me and simply said, “Miss, you're wasting your time.” A literal translation of what he said was,

“Miss, you're losing your time.” I came up with what I thought was the perfect response: “Sir, I may be losing my time, but you're losing your life.” Sincere. Gentle but with a little evangelistic zing. The perfect response. The only problem is that I thought of this perfect reply about 20 minutes after the man had ended our conversation by going into his house and shutting the door in our faces.

In some ways, the letter to the Hebrews is also on a quest for the perfect response in the face of a potential lack of faith. The letter is addressed to Christians who have come to know the resurrected Jesus in a vibrant, life-changing way. But now, as they are living out that faith, they are encountering social, political, and religious pushback, hostility and even persecution, although this persecution has not yet progressed to point of martyrdom (Heb. 12:4). Because of this hostility, some of these Christians are considering renouncing their faith.

Hearing of their crisis of faith, the author of Hebrews writes to remind them of the beauty and perfection of Christ and to warn them sternly of the dire consequences that await them if they turn their back on Jesus. In effect, the author is trying to help these Christians find the **perfect response** — a good and timely response that will enable them to keep their eyes faithfully on the Lord even amidst the difficult cultural and political circumstances that surround them. You and I and most of the church in the West do not face persecution for our faith. But we sure feel the negative impact of social, cultural, political, religious and a-religious voices in our lives, and we know they have the potential to shake our faith. Hopefully, then, these words of Hebrews today will offer a good and timely and encouraging response for us as well as we seek to follow Jesus faithfully.

So, let's dive into the text. It will be helpful if you keep the passage open in your Bible or in the bulletin. In the section of the letter that Stan / Ileana just read, the author reveals that this perfect response consists of three key elements: **Christian worship, Christian community, and Christian obedience.**

We start with the last two verses of chapter 12: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” Here the central element is worship, which leads us to a key question: What exactly is worship? John Piper defines worship as “a valuing or treasuring of God above all things.”¹ Valuing God above all things is not a reference to Sunday morning worship, though certainly we hope our Sunday worship is an expression of how we treasure God above all else. But the reference here is to something bigger, something broader and all-consuming: worship as the way we live our daily life. Worship as an ongoing, moment-by-moment response to who God is. I like how Eugene Petersen gets at the all-encompassing nature of worship as life and life as worship in his paraphrase of Romans 12:1-2 in *The Message*:

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life — your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life — and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

How do we do this? How do we open ourselves to God so that he can do this work within us and grow us into a life of worship? The text gives us the essential starting point: What inspires our reverence and awe is God as a consuming fire — in other words, God’s character of holiness and righteous judgement. What inspires our thanks is receiving the unshakable kingdom of God — in other words, God’s unfolding reign of love and righteousness. The essential clue that this text gives us is that true worship is always a **response** to who God is and what God is doing. We never initiate true worship. **God is always both the source and the object of true worship.** So if we want to grow into a life of true worship, the most important thing we can do is get to know God on God’s terms. First and foremost, this comes through being in conversation with God through Scripture and prayer. I know this is not a surprising statement to probably any of you. But it is deeply true and deeply necessary. Through Scripture and prayer we

don’t just come to know about God in his character and his actions; through the habits of our consistent time in Scripture and prayer, the Holy Spirit little by little patterns our minds and hearts so that we can actually experience God and his nature. We aren’t just *reading* about God’s love and kindness; we aren’t just *thinking* about God’s saving grace and faithfulness. Instead, through the revelation of his living Word, we encounter the living God of the universe. And we are astonished. Guttled. Filled with awe and reverence. We are moved to worship with whatever we have at our disposal. And what we have at our disposal is our life, more and more handed over to the Lord as a response to the beauty of his perfection revealed to us through our daily conversations with him in Scripture and prayer.

So, a life of worship begins with God himself, whose multifaceted perfection moves us to respond with worship — truly and rightly valuing and treasuring God above all other things. According to Christian thinking across millennia, this broader life of worship then overflows into at least three other expressions: **Christian Worship, Christian Community, and Christian Obedience.** The first of these, worshipping with the gathered body of Christ, is not addressed in this passage, although it is emphasized earlier in Hebrews: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25).

Instead, as we turn to chapter 13, the focus will be on these latter two — Christian community and Christian obedience. Specifically, Hebrews 13:1-6 gives us concrete and practical suggestions for how we can live a life of worship. Thus, Hebrews 12:28-29 tell us *who* we should worship and *why*; Hebrews 13:1-6 tells us *how* to live out that worship in our day-to-day lives. Within these verses, there are three areas we are to focus on.

Love for the Family of Believers

The first area of focus has to do with our life of worship overflowing into **love for the family of believers.** Verse 1 commands us to “let mutual love continue.” The use of the Greek term, “*philadelphia*,” or love for brothers and sisters, tells us that the writer is referring to love between believers who know one another. Which seems pretty simple and straightforward until we remember how hard it can sometimes be to love the brothers and sisters we live closest to in the family of faith. What do

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-worship>

we do when we find ourselves in that place of disobedience, of not wanting to cultivate love for our brothers and sisters? A couple of thoughts:

First, difficulty loving others sometimes starts because of different boundaries. We all have lots of boundaries, some of which we're aware of and some of which we're not. We have boundaries about interpersonal space — how far away a person should stand when we speak together. We have boundaries about time — what constitutes “being on time” and “being late.” We have boundaries about how the flow of a conversation should go — how much give and take there should be and how much self-revelation should happen. And so many more — boundaries galore! When you notice a lack of love towards a brother or sister, it may be helpful to consider whether there are places where you feel your boundaries are being crossed. Simply recognizing a perceived boundary transgression is sometimes enough to allow you to move beyond your resistance towards another person. If that doesn't work, you can also prayerfully consider talking with that person, letting them know where your personal boundary falls and asking them to forbear you in this way.

Another reason for our lack of love can come when we allow personal opinions and beliefs that are not essential tenets of the faith to come between us and other believers. Here are just a few possible examples: Differences of opinion over new earth, old earth, and evolved earth. Differences of opinion about needed social policy and social action. Differences of opinion about praise music and hymns. And we're not even going to mention the color of the paint and the carpet! In cases like these, we wind up privileging a personal opinion over God's mandate for mutual love. How do we stop this?

One thing that has helped me over the years is offering up a “sacrifice of garbage” to God. When I notice those unloving places in me, I gather up the irritation and the resentment. I interrupt the self-righteous conversations with my mirror. I pick up all that ungodliness in my hands, and I lift it to God as a sacrifice of garbage. Left to my own devices, this is the best I can do. Without Christ, this is the best I can offer. I lift my hardheartedness in confession. I acknowledge my inability to be loving on my own. And I ask God to have mercy and to come to my help. To receive my sacrifice of garbage and to transform it into something loving and

beautiful and worthy that will please God and bring him glory. Sometimes I have to offer that sacrifice of unloving garbage a dozen times a day for days on end. But I can tell you this: Never once have I lifted that sacrifice of garbage to God without God coming to my aid and transforming it towards love. God is love, and when we ask him to help us love the family of God better, he will answer that prayer.

[[If you would like to read some reflections on verses 2 and 3, which I had to leave out for time, look after the Next Step questions. Note, though, that you do not need to read this extra section in order to engage with the Next Step questions.]]

Honoring Marriage

The second area of focus in Hebrews 13:1-6 concerns **honoring marriage**. In verse 4 we read, “Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.” There are a few things of note here. First, the institution of marriage itself is to be held in honor. Back in the early church, and almost inconceivable to us today, one assault on marriage as a social institution came from within the church from strict ascetic groups who discouraged marriage and held up celibacy as the ideal for all believers. This is contrary to the teaching of the Bible, which establishes and validates the consecrated union between a man and a woman. Even the Apostle Paul, who wished that every believer might be celibate like him in order to devote themselves to the work of the gospel, recognized that the ability to stay unmarried is a type of gift from God and therefore can never be a spiritual mandate for the church at large (1 Cor. 7:7).

Today, a demand for celibacy is not the single greatest threat to the institution of marriage within the church. Instead, it is the creep of our culture, which tends to look at marriage and ask, “Why bother?” That fount of wisdom, wikiHow, lists the top 22 reasons why people don't want to get married today, most of which boil down to a desire *not* to have to compromise their personal independence and sexual and economic freedom by becoming responsible for the well-being of another person in an intimate relationship, as well as any children that may be born of the union.² Certainly, there are good reasons to stay unmarried and good reasons not to rush into marriage. What is notable in the wikiHow article, which is co-authored by at least one licensed

² <https://www.wikihow.com/Signs-You-Will-Never-Get-Married>

counselor, is that no matter which of these 22 reasons predicts why someone won't get married, the outcome will be the same: they "will still be happy anyway." There is no defense of marriage, only a rationalization of why not marrying is an equally valid choice. While this rationalization may accurately reflect western cultural attitudes today, it falls well short of the command in Hebrews to honor the institution of marriage.

Not only is the institution of marriage to be held in honor, but the marriage bed is to be kept undefiled. In the early church, another threat to marriage may have come from Gentile males who were newer converts to the faith. In Roman society, males were culturally permitted to have sex not only with their own wife but also with any servants or slaves in the household. This would have been shockingly contrary to the monogamous sexual ethic undergirding the church through its Jewish roots. And while today the notion of faithful, monogamous marriage is still the norm in the church, cultural ideas about the permissiveness of pornography or the prudishness of being sexually faithful in thought, word and deed seem to be knocking on the bedroom door.

The question of how the church can help safeguard marriage is therefore an important one. Because let's not miss how this verse ends: God will judge fornicators and adulterers. In other words, any and all sex outside of the covenant of marriage is an affront to our holy God and will be judged. That is a sobering thought. Now, here's where we need to pause and say clearly: No sexual sinner is beyond God's forgiveness. Sexual sin is *not* the unpardonable sin. And yet, God stands opposed to sexual sin because it isn't good for us. It does harm to those created in the image of God, and therefore God stands against it. So, what do we do?

The verse itself points us in the right direction by its use of the words "by all": Let marriage be held in honor *by all*. Often in the New Testament — in Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Peter — behavioral instructions are directed towards specific groups of people: husbands should do this and not do that; wives should do this and not do that. But here the commandment is to all Christians, regardless of whether they are married or not. The onus isn't only on married couples to take care of their marriage; this verse says that the church itself has a role to play in strengthening marriages. Certainly, programs like The Marriage Course are wonderful ways that Faith helps nurture marriages. And Family

Ministry's Family Park Days are brilliant in that they foster fellowship among parents and friendship among kids in a way that keeps families together and doesn't become just one more cultural stress that divides families in time and space.

But if we *all* are commanded to honor marriage, what does that look like for the rest of us who aren't in charge of programming here at Faith? How can we honor and strengthen marriages? There's a question for Life Groups this week that asks you to think about how you can do this, but here are a couple of ideas to prime the pump:

If you are a married couple with more years of marital experience under your belt, try to connect with younger couples. Younger couples, develop friendships with couples who have celebrated more anniversaries than you. We tend to connect most often with folks who are in a similar life situation to us in terms of singleness, couple-hood and kids. And this makes sense. But the wisdom of couples who have been doing marriage longer than us is indispensable and one of the great gifts that the intergenerational church has to offer. Offer this gift if you have it. Seek out this gift because you need it.

If you are in a situation where a spouse is talking about an issue in their marriage, listen, but also gently help that person listen for where and how God may be at work in this situation. Pray with and for that person and pray with that person for their marriage. Our culture is a paragon of division, recklessly sowing seeds that breed contempt and disrespect. As the Body of Christ, we want to resist this tendency. Take every opportunity to pray for unity within the church, including within marriages.

Practicing Contentment

On to the third area covered in Hebrews 13:1-6: **practicing contentment**. In verses 5 and 6 we read, "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.' So we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'"

That phrase, "I will never leave you or forsake you,"³ is more potent in the Greek than in the English. The Greek uses two emphatic negatives, which can be translated as "under no circumstance" or "never will I ever." In effect, God is saying, "Never will I ever leave you; never will I

³ This is a quote from Deut. 31:6, Josh. 1:5.

ever forsake you.” The source of our contentment, then, is not our circumstances but rather God’s very character. Because we can rest in the surety of God’s unfailing presence, we can confidently declare, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?”⁴ In the Greek, this last question is in the future tense: What *will* a mortal do to me? The verb “can do” is a word of potential and leaves us looking over our shoulder and asking, Of all the possible harm that someone can do to me, what might it be? The verb “will do” is a word of reality and drastically reduces the options: In all seriousness, with the Lord as my presence and my help, what will a human do to me? The answer, at least for the author of Hebrews, is “nothing much.”

Conclusions

We have covered a lot of territory today, so let’s circle back to where we started. This passage urges us to cultivate the “perfect response” to the perfection of God. That response is not just a Sunday morning of worship, but the whole of our life declaring in word and deed the absolute worth of our God. We’ve mentioned three ways that Hebrews urges us to cultivate this life of worship: through gathering for Christian worship (Heb. 10:24-25), through being with Christians in fellowship and through obeying commandments to believers. As we close, there is just one more thing to point out here, and that is **how these three elements of Christian worship, Christian community, and Christian obedience all fit together.**

First, nowhere is this a solitary endeavor. Our life of worship always starts with the reality of God, so even when we are sitting alone doing our devotions, we are not alone; the Spirit of God is our constant companion. Second, notice the mutuality between Christian obedience and Christian community (which, as a reminder, includes Christian worship). Each one of the verses we’ve looked at today has at least one command that we as Christians are to obey. Yet our obedience is not for our sakes alone, but rather our obedience strengthens the Christian community. As we obey the command to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we help them feel connected to the congregation and encouraged in their own life of worship. As we all find ways to honor marriage, we support couples as they do the important work of honoring their covenant before God. The goal of Christian obedience isn’t just obedience for its own sake. The goal of obedience isn’t to get “straight A’s” on our spiritual report card.

Christian obedience, according to Hebrews 13, is a means for strengthening the Church of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, Christian community, our mutual love, encourages us in our Christian obedience. The witness of brothers and sisters who model how to continue walking with Christ even in times of spiritual dryness, the example of those who demonstrate real contentment even in hard circumstances ... these things can encourage us to “keep on keepin’ on” in our walk with Christ. The beauty of God’s design is that a life of worship was never intended to be one of solitary confinement. Instead that life of worship is meant to be lived out moment by moment in response to the breathtaking worth of God AND in the companionship of our brothers and sisters in Christ — the whole people of God growing in faithfulness together as we declare and reflect the beauty of our Lord and Savior. The perfect response to the glory of God. Amen.

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“The Next Step”

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Hebrews 12:28—13:6 again. What do you notice as you read it through this time?
2. How do you define worship? How is it possible that my everyday, workaday, mundane, messed-up life, and yours, can be worship? In what specific ways do you see (and not see) your day-to-day life as worship?
3. As you think about the Christians who are easy for you to love and those who are hard for you to love (no need to name names...), do you notice any patterns in yourself that might help you understand where and why you fall short in Christian love? Is there a “sacrifice of garbage” that you need to offer to the Lord?
4. What are some ways you can better honor marriage, whether your own or someone else’s? What can you do, or stop doing, to safeguard the bond of marriage, whether your own or someone else’s?
5. How does the love of money, or greed, interfere with a life of worship? (See Colossians 3:5 for a hint.)

⁴ This is a quote from Psalm 118:6.

6. In what specific ways has God helped you grow in contentment over the past couple of years? Are there currently areas of your life (stuff, circumstances, relationships...) where you tend to be discontent? Imagine Jesus coming to your aid here. What do you need in order to know with confidence that he has your back, that he is your rock-solid helper (13:6)?
7. How do this Bible passage and sermon help you understand in a fuller way the interconnections between Christian worship, Christian community and Christian obedience? How will you apply this understanding in a way that honors God?
8. What is the Lord teaching you here, and what will be your “perfect response”?

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Table to Table

A question for kids and adults to answer together

When and where do we worship God?

What do you think:

Can we worship God at the breakfast table or when we're playing? How?

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Reflections on Hebrews 13:2-3:

As part of loving the family of believers, verse 2 commands us, “**Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.**” The word for “hospitality to strangers” is “love of strangers” in the Greek. Commentators largely hold that this refers not to strangers in the world at large but rather to Christian who are not yet known to a local congregation. It was not uncommon for people who travelled in ancient times to stay with people in their same guild. So a traveling metalsmith from Ephesus might stay in Corinth with a member of that city’s metalsmithing guild. It was the same for traveling Christians, who would seek shelter with a local church. This was the custom of the time, and it was due partly to the reality of how bad roadside inns were at the time. Inns were usually filthy, exorbitantly expensive, dangerous, and rowdy. They were not fit places to stay. Because of this, hospitality towards strangers was needed.

So how can we, as a community, extend hospitality to Christians whom we don’t yet know? This church sometimes has wonderful opportunities to welcome Christians from around the world and around the States. We have visitors from our mission partnerships in East Africa. We have summer fellows who work with us three months every summer. We have retreat speakers who sometimes prefer being in a home to a hotel. When we have such visitors, the call goes out for people to lodge them and to host them for meals.

So here’s a question: Might you have the room to host one or more of these visiting Christians in your home? If you have the space to host but you’re thinking, “Wow, I need to spruce up that guest room first,” then make a plan to do it. Paint the walls. Clean out the closet. Update the curtains. Keep it simple. But get things ready now so that when the call goes out again, you are in a position to say yes. After all, you never know what good things God is up to and how he might want to include you in his work of blessing and salvation through the simple act of extending hospitality to Christians whom you don’t yet know.

The final part of loving the family of God comes in verse 3. “**Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.**” Once again, these verses in the original are directed towards caring for Christians. We know from Paul’s New Testament letters that it was not uncommon for vocal Christ followers to be imprisoned for their faith, often because they were seen as rabble-rousers who threatened the status quo or social harmony. Those who were imprisoned could also be subjected to torture, including vicious beatings. As we also know from Paul’s letters and other ancient sources, family members, slaves and friends were sometimes allowed into the prison to bring food and other items to their friends and family. This sort of help was often necessary to a prisoner’s survival because many prisons didn’t provide food at all.

Yet, while highly beneficial to prisoners, these visits could prove dangerous to those who came bearing help. Depending on the political climate and the particular prison, visitors could become prisoners themselves. Despite the risk, early Christians earned a reputation of not abandoning their brothers and sisters in prison. Origen was a renowned third-century Christian scholar and theologian. He was also known for his courage because he would stay with believers in prison and, when they were condemned to death, he would walk with them to the place of execution. Eventually Origen

himself was arrested and tortured during a season of persecution against the church. Although eventually released from prison, he never recovered from his injuries and succumbed to them shortly after.

What are we to make of this verse when we don't live in a place where Christians are locked up and tortured? Here is just one idea: A couple of months ago, we met Bahru Kassa, president of the Theological College of Ethiopia. This seminary trains men and women to carry the gospel back to their hometowns. The graduates go back to places, some of which are overtly hostile to the gospel. Graduates have been imprisoned and some have been tortured. Obviously, we cannot visit these people in prison. But what we can do is help these students be as prepared as possible, as effective as possible, in their gospel labors. They have a fire in their belly, and they going to witness for Christ. So perhaps our call is to help equip them. Our congregation already provides funding for scholarships. But perhaps some of us as individuals are called to fund further scholarships. \$1,000 per year pays the tuition and board of one student for one year. The program is 2 or 4 years in length, depending on which course of study the students choose.

The seminary is also working to translate their own course materials into more languages. Ethiopia has over 100 distinct languages. By translating the training materials into local tongues and teaching them at regional satellite campuses, more students can be trained to reach out with the gospel. In addition, the seminary needs to purchase Bibles in these local languages. Both the translation process and the purchase of Bibles are waiting only on further funding. Might this be a place where you are called to serve by offering of your finances? If you would like more information, talk with Mission Elder Lilian Wanjau or Reverend Rick Hull.