JESUS CHRIST IS THE SAME YESTERDAY AND TODAY AND FOREVER

Hebrews 13:1–25

Key Verse: 13:8

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

In a brief section of the movie “Forest Gump,” the main character suddenly starts running. This guy runs all across the United States for 3.5 years, until his hair and beard become long. During all that running, Forest Gump endures many hardships. He perseveres so much that he gains a great national following. But then, he suddenly stops running, and everybody wants to know why. He shrugs his shoulders and says, “I just felt like it.” Forest Gump didn’t know why he was running, so continuing to do it felt meaningless. The real reason he started running was because the girl he loved rejected him. That couldn’t be a real reason for persevering, so Forest Gump fizzled out.

The book of Hebrews was written for Christians who were going through a lot of suffering for their faith. They were being persecuted. Some felt things were getting too hard. Some were wondering why they had to press on. This letter gives many Biblical and theological reasons why believers in Jesus need to persevere in faith. Now in the last chapter the author gets practical. He describes what a persevering Christian life actually looks like. Persevering in Christian life doesn’t mean just repeating the same things over and over again. It has to do with the quality of our spiritual life. In today’s passage we can see the high quality of Christian life that perseverance brings. Having a high quality of Christian life is not easy. How can we persevere until we have a deep and rich spiritual life? It’s as we grow in our realization of who Jesus is. Hebrews teaches many things about Jesus. But today’s passage mainly teaches that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. He is forever accessible and available to us, and forever our most inspiring example. In this study we want to think about what that really means. Through this study may God inspire us to persevere in our faith in Jesus until we grow into the kind of people God can bless and use.

Before jumping right in to chapter 13, let’s first look at the last two verses of chapter 12. (Read them.) These verses tell us that quality of our Christian life is rooted in our faith in two things: what God is giving us, and who God is. What is God giving us? It says he’s giving us “a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” At first that may sound like a bunch of empty words. But actually, it’s the greatest promise ever. When we repent of our sins, put our faith in Jesus, and run with perseverance the race marked out for us, God promises that in the end we’ll be receiving a kingdom. What kind of kingdom is it? Here it just says briefly that it’s “a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” Many people would probably say they don’t want a kingdom; it’s too much trouble. But everybody has a real inner longing for a place they can call home. Everybody wants a place where they feel safe, where they feel they belong, where they are valued, where there are people who love them and whom they love. Actually, God’s kingdom is such a place. Most of us have childhood memories, and hopefully they’re happy ones. But when we become adults, we find that our childhood world is “Gone with the Wind.” It passed away too soon. Our parents may have split up and moved on, or passed away, and so may our siblings. Many of our childhood friendships evaporate. We often face a world where people don’t know us, where we kind of don’t matter, where everything can seem so uncertain. We can sometimes wonder what’s the point of all the struggles of life. But the author of Hebrews says the point of believing in Jesus is that we’ll be receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. It’s our permanent, eternal home, a home where we’re dearly loved as God’s children, a place of true security, real value and complete fulfillment. And it’s a place that will never be shaken. A quality Christian life is centered around this hope, a hope not in this world, but a real hope in heaven. When this hope is dim in our hearts, we tend to give up on and check out of Christian life. But when this hope is burning in our hearts, we persevere.

The other thing that gives our Christian life real quality is our realization of who God is. It says our “God is a consuming fire.” That’s a pretty intense statement, isn’t it? The last two verses of chapter 12 tell us to be thankful and worship him. But how do we really worship a God who’s a consuming fire? It’s kind of intimidating. Basically it’s saying we can’t come to God in any ole way, or like we’re doing him a big favor. Literally, it tells us to be thankful for the kingdom he’ll be giving us, and to worship him “acceptably with reverence and awe.” What gives us this reverence and awe for God? It’s the truth that God is a consuming fire. God is not a good-minded old grandpa that we can manipulate to get what we want; God is holy. God hates sin. God will surely punish sin and eventually eliminate all of it. Hebrews encourages us to approach his throne of grace with confidence, to receive mercy and find help in our time of need (4:16). But it also encourages us to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. This faith in God and in his kingdom is at the core of all the teachings of chapter 13. Because our God is a consuming fire, and because he’ll be giving us a kingdom that cannot be shaken, what should we be doing in our day-to-day lives?

**First**, “keep on loving one another.” Read verse 1. It’s interesting that the first element mentioned in practical Christian life is to love one another. Our Lord Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn13:35). It’s Jesus’ one, simple, main command. It may sound easy. But even to start loving one another is hard, because we’re all so different, and, because our nature is to be proud and selfish. To love requires being humble. To love requires giving and serving. To love requires being faithful. It’s especially hard to love when we don’t get loved back. It’s hard to love when people take and take, and don’t commit to the relationship or show any appreciation. It’s hard to love when we feel used. How can we keep on loving? That’s a really good question. The only way seems to be when we have hope in God and in his kingdom. We keep on loving not because of the results, not because we feel like it, not because people appreciate us, but because we realize who God is and believe the sure promise of his kingdom.

Verse 1 says to love “as brothers and sisters.” It means to love our fellow believers as our dear spiritual family members. It’s not casual or superficial, but intense, and risky. We have to persevere and grow into it. A popular philosophy today is “family first.” But real Christians put their spiritual family first. To love each other as brothers and sisters means to see each other from God’s point of view. Jesus said, “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk3:35). The Apostle John said that whoever believes in Jesus is born of God, and whoever loves a father love his child as well (1Jn5:1). It means if we really love God, then we really love his beloved children, no matter who they are. Many people naturally love their own parents or children; some try very hard to love those they personally study the Bible with. But verse 1 tells us to keep on loving our fellow church members as our dear brothers and sisters in Christ. We may not have natural affinities for one another. We probably didn’t choose to be together. We may feel disconnected humanly by differences in age, or race, or culture, or personality. But we’re together not because of biological or legal ties, not for mutual benefit, but simply because of Jesus. Still, we’re all so different. So to love one another requires a decision of faith. And to keep on loving one another requires persevering faith. To love as brothers and sisters, we have to be there for one another when we’re going through adversity (Pr17:17). To love as brothers and sisters, we need to be devoted to one another (Ro12:10). To love as brothers and sisters, we need mutual affection for one another, and when we grow in such love, our faith in Jesus is effective and productive (2Pe1:5–7).

**Second**, “show hospitality to strangers.” We may be busy struggling to love one another, and that may seem hard enough, but it doesn’t stop there. Read verse 2. Who are the “strangers”? It’s not necessarily strange people. Strangers can mean those we don’t know yet. It also can mean foreigners (Lev19:34). Foreigners are easy to overlook, easy to forget, people who aren’t established and don’t have any security, so they have many needs. “Showing hospitality” to them is a form of love. The Bible lists not just teaching ability, but hospitality as a key requirement to be a leader among God’s people (1Ti3:2; Tit1:8; cf. Ro12:13; 1Pe4:9). Usually we think hospitality means to invite people into our homes. But hospitality really has to do with another person’s needs. Jesus said, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Mt25:35,36). Hospitality is to be aware of people’s needs and to share what we have. To really do it, we need to keep in mind what Jesus said: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt25:40). Being hospitable to strangers is a real-life, tangible way of serving Jesus. The main characteristic of Christian life is not only real love for one another, but also real love for strangers. Sometimes, those who need our hospitality seem burdensome with their many needs. They may show up at inconvenient times, when we’re busy. Showing hospitality often doesn’t give us any recognition, and it may not feel good. But it says here not to forget doing it. Practicing hospitality to strangers is not for the sake of results; it’s the expression of living before the eyes of God with genuine faith in Jesus.

**Third**,“continue to remember those in prison and the mistreated.” The next verse describes another important aspect of loving. Read verse 3. Here, to love means to be mindful of what others are going through, even to feel what they’re feeling. There’s a famous saying, “Walk a mile in my shoes.” Love can’t be a superficial gesture or just a duty; it means using our minds and hearts, and even our imagination. Loving requires our whole being. We should also note here that those who are “in prison” or “mistreated” aren’t just random, suffering people; they are those being persecuted for their faith. Do we even know anyone who is being persecuted for their Christian faith? Are we even aware of when it’s happening? While loving one another and showing hospitality to strangers, we also need to keep in our hearts those who are really suffering for their faith.

**Fourth**, honor marriage.Then there’s an area of Christian life where many actually fail. Read verse 4. Growing in persevering faith and love transforms our moral life as well. In the world, so many people don’t honor marriage. They think of marriage as a mutually beneficial contract that they entered into on their own, and that they can end it when it no longer benefits them. But the Bible says marriage is God’s institution. Jesus said, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mt19:6b) God joins us together with one life partner, and he intends it to be for life. Without God, there’s no absolute in marriage. But with God, there is. To honor marriage, husbands and wives should always be encouraged to love one another and to be absolutely faithful to one another. What’s the meaning of loving others in the church, and needy strangers, if we can’t even love our own spouse? That’s not the quality of Christian life that pleases God. While loving one another, and loving strangers, and loving suffering Christians, we also need to be loving the spouse God has given us. When we persevere through difficulties in loving our spouse, we grow deeper in love, we mature in our capacity to love, and God makes us so happy.

It says clearly that the marriage bed should be “kept pure.” It means that God gave us sex only in the context of marriage. In other words, only married people should be sharing a bed. And married people should only be sleeping with one another. Keeping the marriage bed pure is not just avoiding literal acts of adultery, but not even enjoying sexual fantasies or online pictures about people other than my spouse. Also, to have a pure marriage bed, young single adults should be saving themselves for marriage. 1 Timothy 5:1b,2 says, “Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.” We honor marriage and the marriage bed not to judge or condemn those who don’t, or to make ourselves feel better than others, or to force people to be miserable; we do this out of reverence for God. It says, “For God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” It harks back to God who “is a consuming fire.” Our society is the opposite of this. Sexual immorality is a normal way of life for so many people, starting with teenagers. It’s so hard living in such a culture to keep the marriage bed pure. We need to always remember that we’ll be receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and that our God is a consuming fire. Then we can honor marriage as God wants.

**Fifth**,“keep your lives free from the love of money.” Many people fail not only with sex but also with money. Read verse 5. Even as Christians, love of money can creep into our lives subtly, especially living in our materialistic culture with its constant emphasis on buying and having things. If we don’t have nice things, a nice house, a nice car, nice clothes, et cetera, et cetera, we’re made to feel like we’re strange, or like losers. People are constantly comparing how much money they make, what kind of house or car they have, what kind of clothes they wear, what places they’ve been. But as Christians, our money does not define us; our faith in Jesus is what defines us. Money cannot satisfy us; a relationship with Jesus satisfies us. It says to be content with what we have. It means to be thankful for whatever God gives us, and not try to fill our empty souls with material things, but fill our souls with Jesus. The author quotes Deuteronomy 31:6: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” Money leaves us and money forsakes us. But God’s presence in our lives is what truly satisfies our souls and gives us true security. Knowing what a problem materialism can be practically, the author goes on. Read verse 6. This suggests that a pursuit of money comes from fear, fear of what people may do to us if we don’t have money. But our confidence comes not from the amount of money we may make; we gain true confidence when believe that God is my helper. When God is our helper, we have true security, and no one can harm us.

**Sixth**, “remember your leaders.”The author goes on to describe another quality of Christian life. Read verse 7. Because it uses the past tense of the verb “spoke,” this verse seems to refer to leaders who passed away and went to heaven. To remember such leaders means to remember their spiritual legacies. And the one legacy mentioned here is that they “spoke the word of God to you.” That may sound nice, but actually it can be very painful and very challenging. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” The best Christian leaders speak the word of God to us as it is, without watering it down, knowing that the word of God alone will help us go deeper into a real relationship with Jesus. To have someone speak the word of God to us, at just the right time in our lives, is the greatest blessing there is. In this confusing, relativistic world, what vulnerable college students may need most is to hear the convicting, life-giving word of God.

It also says here not just to remember leaders who spoke the word of God, but to “consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” What’s the way of life of a Christian leader? It’s simple: following the example of Jesus. Jesus the Son of God is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being (1:3). But he shared in our humanity and was made like us, fully human in every way (2:14,17). He also was tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin (4:15). During the days of his life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears, he was heard because of his reverent submission. He learned obedience from what he suffered. The outcome of Jesus’ way of life was that he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (5:7,8). Those who imitate his good example also become a source of salvation in this world. The best Christian leaders are those who imitate the example of Jesus. They struggle to be pure like Jesus, humble like Jesus, loving like Jesus, to obey God like Jesus, to sacrifice themselves for sinners like Jesus. The outcome of such a way of life is to live a life that actually matters, a life spent not on trivial pursuits, but on bringing others to God’s eternal kingdom. It’s a life that touches and blesses many others. But the author knew that, sadly, the lives of many wonderful Christian leaders are not permanent.

**Seventh**,“Jesus Christ is the same.” Let’s read verse 8. Not all people have close access to great Christian leaders. But we all have access to Jesus. All we have to do is read the Bible and pray, and we can meet him there. And Jesus never changes. It says he’s the same yesterday and today and forever. But what does it mean? Through Jesus, God himself still speaks to us (1:2). Through Jesus we can still be purified of our sins (1:3; 2:17b). By the grace of God, Jesus still tastes death for us all (2:9). Jesus still is not ashamed to call each of us his brothers and sisters (2:11). Jesus still frees us from our fear of death (2:15). Because Jesus himself suffered when he was tempted, he’s still able to help those who are being tempted (2:18). We still need to fix our thoughts and our eyes on Jesus (3:1; 12:2). Jesus is still our great high priest who’s ascended into heaven; he’s still able to empathize with our weaknesses and to give us mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (4:14–16). Jesus still gives us hope in God and his kingdom as an anchor for our souls, firm and secure (6:19a). Jesus is still able to save completely those who come to God through him, for he always lives to intercede for us (7:25). Jesus still truly meets our need (7:26). When he offered himself, he sacrificed for sin once for all (7:27b). Jesus still helps us know the Lord by experiencing his forgiveness (8:11,12). The blood of Christ is still able to cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God (9:14). Jesus will appear on earth a second time to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (9:28). The sacrifice of the body of Jesus still makes us holy, and perfect forever (10:10,14). Through Jesus we still can have confidence to approach the holy God and draw near to him (10:19–23). Through Jesus we can still spur one another on toward love and good deeds (10:24). 3:14 reads, “We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.” May God bless each of us to draw near to Jesus, who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

**Eighth**,“hearts strengthened by grace.” In verses 9,10 the author warns us not to be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. In his time, they were various forms of legalism. People thought if they were stricter about religious rituals they could make themselves more holy. But actually, what we really need is to have our hearts strengthened by grace. It means we need to experience the grace of Jesus in our lives regularly. We need to remember his grace and rely on his grace, not on our efforts. It’s his grace, not our efforts, that makes us spiritually strong (2Ti2:1).

**Ninth**, “go to him, outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.” In verses 12–14 the author uses the word “outside” three times. But he’s not talking about camping outdoors; he’s talking about being banned from being among God’s people. The Christians the author was writing to were basically kicked out of the synagogue and banned from Jewish social life. It was intense pressure to renounce their faith in Jesus. But the author tells them to embrace being ostracized and kicked out. Today, too, if we follow Jesus, we won’t be embraced by the world; we’ll be ridiculed and considered strange. But we shouldn’t be ashamed of our faith in Jesus, who was crucified on a cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Instead, we should embrace the disgrace that Jesus bore. We should be willing to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and follow him (Lk9:23).Embracing this disgrace is not easy. So the author says something more to encourage us. Read verse 14. To embrace disgrace, we need this hope.

**Tenth**,make the sacrifices that please God. The Jews at the time were still making offerings, probably including sacrifice animals, as well as grain offerings, drink offerings and other offerings. But in verses 15,16 the author tells us which sacrifices we who believe in Jesus should be making. We should continually be offering to God a sacrifice of praise. And we should keep doing good and sharing with others. Why is God pleased only with such offerings? It’s because these sacrifices aren’t done to earn righteousness; they’re in response to God’s grace. So, because of his grace we should be praising God and sharing with others.

**Eleventh**,have confidence in your leaders. Read verse 17. There’s not much more to say here than this. Then the author makes a personal request. Read verses 18,19. It seems he himself may have been under house arrest for his faith, so he’s asking for prayer support.

Finally, let’s read the author’s benediction in verses 20,21. God who brought Jesus back from the dead after he gave his life for his sheep is the God who can equip us with everything good for doing his will. Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever is still that great Shepherd of the sheep. As we draw close to him, may God equip each one of us to serve new students in this new school year.