

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## Exclusion and Inclusion

The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Hebrews 13:1--16

**K**eepest on loving each other as brothers. <sup>2</sup> Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>3</sup> Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. <sup>4</sup> Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. <sup>5</sup> Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." <sup>6</sup> So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" <sup>7</sup> Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. <sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. <sup>9</sup> Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. <sup>10</sup> We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. <sup>11</sup> The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. <sup>12</sup> And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. <sup>14</sup> For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. <sup>15</sup> Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name. <sup>16</sup> And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Today we're finishing up our four sermon series on the Letter to the Hebrews. Our reading this morning includes the writer's final exhortations to his readers in the last chapter. Scholars agree that Hebrews was probably written to Jewish Christians, maybe living in Rome, who had been persecuted for their faith. They were discouraged and beaten down. They were fighting the temptation to return to Judaism and abandon living by faith in Christ.

These people had been doubly excluded. Because they were Jews, the pagan culture of the Roman Empire was hostile towards them. To the average Roman, Jews were atheistic or at least irreligious because they had no temples or idols or visible religious equipment. Synagogues were simply gathering places where the Scriptures were read.

Because these were Christian Jews, the Jewish community itself excluded them. The Christian Jews radically reinterpreted the Old Testament, and they outraged accepted social norms by freely mixing with other Christians who were gentiles.

The author of Hebrews goes about encouraging these folks by reminding them of God's purposes since the beginning. And he points out that in their suffering, they are part of God's saving purposes. Using the Hebrew Scriptures over and over again he shows how those Scriptures all focus on the glorious salvation that God has brought into the world in Jesus. He begins by reminding them that Jesus is the Son of God, the creator of the world, whose death cleanses us from sin. He is much higher than the angels, the very messengers of God. He demonstrates that Jesus is much greater than even Moses, the towering figure of Jewish life and faith. He shows that long before Moses was born God had destined Christ to be an eternal high priest "after the order of Melchizedek," the mysterious figure to whom Abraham himself paid tithes. In chapter 9, he reminds his readers that unlike the high priests serving at the temple in Jerusalem, **"Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence."** (Hebrews 9:24) And he entered with his own blood, not the blood of the sacrifice animals.

The writer knows something about what his readers have been through. They have suffered for their faith. At the end of chapter ten he reminds them: **"Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. <sup>33</sup> Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. <sup>34</sup> You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves**

had better and lasting possessions. <sup>35</sup> So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. <sup>36</sup> You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. <sup>37</sup> For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. <sup>38</sup> But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." <sup>39</sup> But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved." (Hebrews 10:32-39)

Then he lists the catalogue of heroes of the Old Testament who have endured terrible adversity and hostility, just as the recipients of this letter have. After going through this Hall of Fame, he points out that **"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. <sup>40</sup> God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."** Hebrews 11:39-40)

In our reading last week from chapter twelve the writer warns his readers against the great danger in not responding to the great salvation God has made freely available in Jesus Christ. He ends chapter twelve by saying, **"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."** (Hebrews 12:28) Chuck described the "RSVP" that God expects to his offer, from each of us. It is a response that requires action: **"faith not acted upon is no faith."**

This brings us to our reading today, where the writer is ending his letter. In the first nine verses, he gives ethical instructions: love each others as brothers and sisters; be hospitable; remember prisoners and people who are oppressed and mistreated for the faith; honor marriage and avoid sexual immorality; don't be greedy for money. He reminds them that their leaders, those who first shared Christ with them, suffered as a result. He cautions them to avoid "all kinds of strange teachings" about ceremonial foods instead of relying on the grace of God for strength.

But in verse 10, there's a sudden change when the writer goes back to the language of Jewish ritual sacrifice and priesthood: **"We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. <sup>11</sup> The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. <sup>12</sup> And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. <sup>13</sup> Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. <sup>14</sup> For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. <sup>15</sup> Through Jesus,**

**therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name. <sup>16</sup> And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”**

This seems to be an obscure reference to how the carcasses of sacrificial animals ought to be disposed of. But it brings out a stark and radical reality: like the carcasses, the Son of God himself was disposed of by God’s own people outside the very city in which he himself had promised to dwell with them.

It was on the unholy ground *outside* the city, that **“Jesus . . . suffered to make the people holy through his own blood.”** By excluding its Messiah and Savior, institutional Judaism excluded itself from the very salvation he brought. But by his death on the cross outside the city limits, Jesus was including everyone in the world who comes to him—Jew and gentile--in God’s saving purposes. Our writer is saying that God has moved his “theater of operations” from inside the fixed boundaries of Judaism, to outside those boundaries, to the world at large.

We may not feel excluded the way the original readers of this letter were. But that says more about us than about the age we live in. If we were to seriously, without compromise, undertake to live by the ethical instructions in the first nine verses, we would soon find out how exclusion feels. These ethics are radically opposed to the way many people in our culture think and behave. Brotherly love is absent from a society that sees people only as markets or demographics. Hospitality to strangers is unknown when we become suspicious of people who look or dress differently walking in their neighborhood. Compassion for those who are imprisoned or mistreated for their faith in Christ is rarely mentioned. Honor for marriage and sexuality is rapidly eroding, as more and more couples live together and have children without marrying, even in middle and upper-income groups. Our economic woes can largely be traced to rampant and widespread greed for money on the part of institutions and individuals.

The writer to the Hebrews exhorts people who are doubly excluded to come outside the boundaries of both the surrounding culture and their Jewish religion. Outside those boundaries, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through whom the worlds were made, and who for us humans and our salvation left the boundaries of heaven for earth, and made holy all those who come out to him. Jesus has included in his kingdom every person who repents of having excluded him from their lives through their sin.

Have you come to him, **“outside the camp?”** In following Christ, have you turned your back not only on what is sinful and immoral, but on the

comfort zone that is so much a part of our life and our culture, and yes, our Christianity?

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, you left the glory of heaven and lowered yourself to become one of us in this world. You came to what belonged to you, but we excluded you. But because of your boundless love for us, you died and rose again to include us in that city that endures forever. Through the power of your Spirit, give each of us boldness to do what you did: to leave the familiar borders of our lives to reach out in love to include in your kingdom those whom you are even now calling to yourself. Amen.