

## A Better Worship

Hebrews 13:1-25

One of our favorite shows that we watch as a family is called *American Ninja Warrior*. If you've never seen it, it's basically an obstacle course. But it's the most intense obstacle course you can imagine. Depending on whether it's a qualifying round or a city final, athletes have to face six to ten obstacles, like hanging onto a log as it spins down a track; or jumping from a trampoline and having to catch yourself between two walls, and walk across them; or climbing challenges where you're not allowed to use your feet, just what you can grip with your hands; and of course the infamous "warped wall"—a 14- or now 18-foot wall that you have to run up and pull yourself over. It's a ton of fun to watch, and some ridiculously talented athletes. And for those who make it to the national finals, they face not just one course, but four courses—four stages, the first three with a different set of obstacle, leading up to the fourth stage with just one obstacle—a 75-foot rope that you must climb in less than 30 seconds. And if you can complete all four stages, the winner will receive \$1 million dollars. In nine seasons so far, only 2 of over 3,500 contestants have been able to do it.

And part of what makes it all so challenging is that many of the obstacles are unknown going into the competition. The first time an athlete will attempt some of them is during their run on the course. That's hard to do. You have to be able to develop general skills and diverse strength in order to apply them to a variety of unknown obstacles in the course of a season. And I think there are a lot of metaphors there for life in general, but also specifically for what we see in Hebrews 13—a series of instructions about what to do in a variety of situations and often unpredictable challenges, all of which we must be able to navigate in order to finish the course well in our worship of Christ. Except it's not our strength that we rely on in order to finish, but the strength of the one who equips us through the blood of the eternal covenant, through our better Savior, Priest, and King, Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 13 is the final chapter of the book—a book which, as we've seen, was written to an ancient church struggling to follow Christ amid great temptation and pressure to let go of Christ and go back to the old covenant and Judaism. And in this final chapter we find some of the features common to the conclusions of New Testament letters—personal greetings and instructions, a closing benediction (esp. vv. 22-25). But we also find these specific instructions, that show us not only what it looks like practically to endure or persevere in the faith (as the whole book has called us to do), but more specifically, what "acceptable worship" looks like under the new covenant in Christ.

If you'll remember to chapter 12 from last week, a question came up toward the end of that chapter. The author writes in 12:28-29: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God *acceptable worship*, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." So what does that mean? What does "acceptable worship" actually

look like? *That's* the question chapter 13 is answering. And what we see here is that it's not defined primarily by *ritual*. That's what worship under the old covenant looked like—the kind of worship the readers were being pressured to readopt—it was highly ritualized under the Levitical system of sacrifices and offerings. That's what many of us are tempted to think about worship today—that it's what you do when you gather in church, the religious motions you or the clergy might go through in a worship service. It's not less than that of course. But that's not the answer we see here in ch. 13. Rather, when we look at all these various instructions about how to honor God in a variety of situations, what we see is that new covenant worship is defined by *a whole life* lived according to God's will to the glory of Christ. Not just what we do when we gather, but how we treasure Christ and follow him in every circumstance of life.

Gathered worship is like the gym. You go to the gym to train, to get in shape, to be equipped. It's essential. But if you're a ninja warrior, the point of the gym is to prepare you for the course. And it's the course that the author focuses on here. Honoring God amid the diverse and often unpredictable situations of life. And we can summarize his diverse instructions under four categories—four “stages” if you will, each with its set of obstacles that we're likely to face and must learn how to overcome. Stage one is *familial love* (vv. 1-6); stage two is *following leaders* (vv. 7-8, 17-19); stage three is *fruitful lips* and *loving fellowship* (vv. 9-16), and stage four, the capstone that sums it all up, is a *faithful life* (vv. 20-21). We'll start with stage one—familial love.

### **Stage One: Familial Love (13:1-6)**

One of the remarkable features of *American Ninja Warrior* is that the competitors are really a family. They're all competing on the same course, but they're all cheering each other on. Rejoicing with each other's victories—even if that means they put up a faster time than you. And weeping when each other falls, sympathizing and encouraging them to get back up. It's really unique among sports to see that kind of affection and family dynamic among competitors.

The church too is a family—a greater and eternal family, purchased and sealed by the very blood of Christ. A family that ought to be marked by a deeper and more abiding affection. And we too are called to run our course together, with familial, brotherly love.

That's the overarching theme of this first stage—the instruction given in v. 1: “Let brotherly love continue.” Let it abide; endure in familial affection. And what that looks like is spelled out in four obstacles: hospitality, compassion, marriage, and money. Obstacles that will test our endurance in several ways, requiring us to overcome selfishness, indifference, self-protection, and self-preservation in order to abide in familial love to the glory of God.

The first obstacle is *hospitality*, which tests our ability to roll with the unforeseen needs of others, and the extent to which we're willing to loosen our grip on our own lives in order to show kindness to others. Verse 2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Let's just get to the weird part of this verse first. Entertaining angels? That's not something we think about as a possibility in our daily interaction with strangers. But remember the story of Abraham in Genesis 18—the three travelers who visited him, whom Abraham hosted—they were angels. Messengers of God. It's a good reminder that this world is much bigger than what we can see with our own eyes—there is a hidden realm; and that God's work is often much bigger than what we can perceive him doing.

And so the point here is that what is strange to us, or people who are strange to us, may not be strange to God. They might just be part of the heavenly family. And so abiding in brotherly love means showing hospitality to strangers. Denying ourselves, counting others more significant, allowing our busy lives to be inconvenienced, and welcoming others into our homes, coming alongside them in their needs, showing kindness—the same way God has shown kindness to us.

The second obstacle is *compassion*—specifically compassion toward those in prison for their faith, which requires us to remember and show concern for those sidelined for their faith. Verse 3: “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” Unless you’re a defense attorney, there’s probably only one reason any of us might have visited someone in prison: because they were family. That’s who we take the time to go see.

And that’s the context in v. 3 as well. Now it’s a good principle to remember the incarcerated generally speaking; our country is in need of a massive prison reform. That’s important. But that’s not what he’s talking about here. In the context of the book, he’s talking about those imprisoned or mistreated for their faith in Christ—brothers and sisters in Christ (cf. 10:34). That’s something we don’t really have to deal with in the U.S.; being mistreated, yes, but not imprisoned. But it happens regularly around the world. And when it happens, do we realize that it’s happening to *our family*? Do we remember them and identify with them? That their trouble is our trouble? It’s hard to visit; we don’t even know them. It’s hard to know what to do. But we can remember them. In our prayers. In our advocacy. They are family.

The third obstacle in stage one is *marriage*. Here the challenge involves overcoming indifference and resisting self-indulgence. Verse 4: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” The family of God is called to honor marriage—regardless of whether you’re married or not. It’s an institution established by God for our good, the good of society, and ultimately his glory. And we live in a world that no longer honors marriage; we have become indifferent. Nearly 50% of marriages end in divorce in America. Only 60% of children today are born into a married household. And of course society has removed marriage from its created context between a man and a woman and redefined it in our own terms. For someone to simply honor the institution of marriage as God designed it is a *huge* victory today.

Now for those of us who have experienced or been wounded by or even contributed to the breakdown of marriage in our society, that doesn’t mean we’re beyond forgiveness or beyond repair. The grace of God is powerful to redeem the sins we commit, *and* the sins committed against us. To bring hope and healing where things are broken, and to give us a bigger family even when our immediate family breaks down. But recognizing the sufficiency of grace for the breakdown of marriage shouldn’t lower our view of the importance and sanctity of marriage. Worshiping God means doing our part to honor marriage in heart and in practice.

And part of that of course is saying no to the self-indulgence that leads to adultery and sexual immorality. Again—a huge temptation in our world, that threatens to trip us so many of us. And it’s something that nobody thinks can happen to them. Staying faithful to your spouse in heart and practice looks like the simplest obstacle on the course. And yet even the seasoned veterans

can trip up on the easy obstacles, if they take them for granted. We need to pursue our spouses; invest in our marriages. Because Jesus is better, we are called to honor marriage.

The fourth obstacle in stage one is a challenge all of us face: *the love of money*—a test designed to expose our hearts and what we’re really depending on in life. Verses 5-6: “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”

Some of the upper-body strength obstacles in the Ninja Warrior competition test not only your grip, but your ability to find something stable to hold onto. As you climb across a structure, you might grab one door knob that’s fixed, and another that spins. Hold onto the wrong one, and you’re going to fall.

When it comes to the love of money versus contentment, it’s not about what we have, but what we’re holding onto. If we’re holding onto our possessions—if that’s our security, our satisfaction—that doorknob is going to spin and throw us off, no matter how tight we grip it. We’ll never have enough. But if we’re holding onto God himself—if we really believe that he will never leave us nor forsake us—that whatever happens in life is part of his plan and an expression of his love—then we can be content regardless of our circumstances, and confident in God’s help, regardless of what this world might throw at us. And therefore free to open our hands and share with others—familial love.

The challenges of familial love are real. And you get through these obstacles and you feel exhausted. But that’s only stage one. There are three more stages in this chapter. Because there’s more to life and faith than familial love.

### **Stage Two: Following Leaders (13:7-8, 17-19)**

Stage two focuses on following leaders, both those who have gone before us and finished their race (vv. 7-8), and those currently over us in our church context (vv. 17-19). And there are three obstacles here—remembering your leaders, obeying your leaders, and praying for your leaders—which all work together to test our teachability, commitment, and humility.

With any sport, you always remember the greats. Even when they’re long gone. Not just because there’s so much to learn from how they played, but because you were inspired by them to get in the game and play yourself. It is no different for the church. Verse 7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

This is the first obstacle in stage two—*remember your leaders*. And the reason most think v. 7 is talking about leaders who have passed on, while v. 17 speaks of your current leaders, is the different instructions—“remember” vs. “obey.” And what are we to remember? To consider the outcome of their way of life. They’ve already made it to the finish line. So if you’re a rookie, you can go through the tapes and you can see the culmination of their career—where they got to, and how they got there, which shows us that we haven’t arrived, and we have a lot to learn, but also strengthens our commitment to follow their example. It gives us something to imitate.

For me, I think of Gerritt VanWagenen. A lover of Jesus, a leader in this church, who together with his wife, Julie, laid down his life, sold everything they had, and moved to Haiti to give their lives to the least of these. A man who endured a difficult ministry context in Haiti, and then endured an aggressive cancer, and remained faithful to the end. I want to be like that.

Some of you might think of Wayne Anderson, the founding pastor of Westgate. Or other leaders that you've had in your life. Remember them, consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate them. And the reason we can still follow the example of those who have already finished the race is because the one they were following has not and does not change. That's what v. 8 tells us: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." We're all following the same Savior. Remember your leaders.

The second obstacle: *obey your leaders*, verse 17. This one can be hard for some of us. Because it tests our humility and our trust. Submitting to someone else means I'm not in charge. I don't have all the answers. And because authority is so easily and so often abused, it can be really tempting to want to get rid of it completely.

But no serious athlete is going ignore the instructions of their coach or trainer. That would be foolish. Especially when that trainer's whole job is to help you succeed. So it is with leaders in the church. Their calling is not to lord their authority over you, but to serve you and help you succeed in following Christ. Look again at v. 17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." Understand that we elders at Westgate will answer to God for how we have cared for you. It's a huge responsibility, and we're by no means perfect at it. We're not above correction; our authority is contingent on our faithfulness to the gospel (cf. 1 Tim. 5:19-20). But we are continually trying to improve our shepherd care (you'll actually be hearing more about that this summer). We do take this seriously; we want to be faithful. But there is a way you can help us. As we seek to shepherd and equip you, "Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Worshiping Jesus, finishing well, involves obeying your leaders.

And it involves *praying for your leaders*. That's the third obstacle in stage two, verse 18. And here the author is asking for prayer for himself and the other apostles, especially that they might be reunited with the church soon. But it's really remarkable—he writes to this church, to instruct, encourage, and warn—but he needs this church as well. His ministry is dependent on their prayers. And the point here is simple: *your leaders need you just as much as you need them*. For accountability, for encouragement, for engagement, but especially for prayer. So pray for your leaders.

That's stage two: following leaders.

### **Stage Three: Fruitful Lips and Loving Fellowship (13:9-16)**

We find stage three in vv. 9-16, with a new theme and a whole new set of obstacles. The theme can be summarized as fruitful lips and loving fellowship, with four obstacles testing our dependence on Christ and our consistency of faith: strange teachings, public ridicule, praising God, and doing good.

An athlete has to watch not just how they train but what they eat. What you feed yourself on affects your endurance. The first obstacle of *strange teaching* is a test of a proper diet. Verse 9:

“Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.”

Now what does he mean by “diverse and strange teachings”? Is he talking about new doctrines that might pop up in the ancient world and threaten to lead people away from Christ? There certainly were plenty of those around. But given the context of the book, it’s pretty unlikely that he’s going to introduce a new threat in his closing comments, when he has spent so much of the book on the pervasive threat of going back to Judaism. It’s far more likely that he is simply describing the old covenant as a strange and diverse teaching. *Because relative to the gospel that has now fulfilled it, it is.* Depending on ritual sacrifices for our relationship with God is foreign to the gospel of God’s grace. It’s the wrong kind of diet.

Under the old covenant, it was common for priests to eat from certain sacrifices made on the altar (13:10; cf. Lev. 6:25-29). It’s where they got their food. Under the new covenant, it’s not food that strengthens our hearts, but the grace we have through Jesus. And the author illustrates that by pointing out that the cross is an altar from which no priest may eat; rather, like certain old covenant offerings where the body of the animal was burned outside the camp (13:11; cf. Lev. 6:30; 16:27), Jesus was sacrificed outside the city (13:12). It’s his way of saying that new covenant worship is not about making ritual sacrifices (contrary to not just Judaism, but some branches of Christianity today); it’s about resting in the finished work of Christ and living a whole life according to God’s will to the glory of Christ.

And that’s going to put us at odds with those who continue to insist on a ritual-driven form of worship, those who boo us from the stands—which brings us to the second obstacle of *public ridicule*. Whereas the old covenant is a strange doctrine relative to the gospel, those who hold to the gospel become strangers in a world dominated by ritualistic worship. The kind of worship that’s all about going through the right motions, but is otherwise disengaged from the heart or from how you live your life. That was true for the Hebrew Christians surrounded by Judaism; it’s true for many of us who have come out of Christian traditions that were all about the Mass—an offering made by the priest up front—and had nothing to do with following Jesus or faith in his finished work—his once-for-all sacrifice for sin on the cross. There’s a ridicule you receive for “abandoning the family.” There’s a cost in holding fast to Christ. It tests our dependence on him.

But the author says embrace it. Embrace the strange. The ridicule hurts. The rejection hurts. But what a privilege to share in the sufferings of Christ. Jesus suffered outside the gate; “Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (13:13-14). Public ridicule is hard, but the prize waiting for us lasts forever.

The third and fourth obstacles bleed into each other in vv. 15-16, and show us the kind of sacrifices that *actually* please God—not animals we bring to an altar or some other ritual sacrifice we perform, but *fruitful lips* that redound in praise, and *loving fellowship* that does good to others.

The most passionate runners in the ninja competitions are often those who are running for someone else. For a loved one that they’ve lost, or for a cause that they’re invested in. And so these final two obstacles of stage three require us to get our eyes off of ourselves and onto the glory of God and the good of others.

First, the glory of God through a sacrifice of praise. Verse 15: “Through [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.” Praise points us upward. It gets our eyes off of ourselves and onto God, delighting in him by declaring who he is and describing what he has done, the majesty of his name and the marvel of his redeeming work in Christ. We praise what we treasure; it’s our natural reaction. We see a beautiful sunset; we comment on it. We watch an incredible accomplishment, we cheer. We build something or buy something special, we show it to others. But there is nothing more worthy of our praise than God himself. That’s who all of this is for, who all of this is about.

Praise points us upward with fruitful lips—declaring his majesty, his greatness, his redeeming power in Christ. And loving fellowship points us outward in doing good and sharing with others. “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (13:16). Doing good—doing what is right, loving your neighbor, sharing what you have, serving others—that is a sacrifice acceptable to God. Now we know what makes it acceptable is ultimately the blood of Jesus; we’ve seen that throughout the book. But our worship is not primarily the ritual; it’s all of life. It’s Sunday to Saturday. Praising God and loving others.

And all of this comes together—in some ways, the whole book comes together—in stage four: a faithful life.

#### **Stage Four: A Faithful Life (13:20-21)**

There’s only one obstacle in stage four of the American Ninja Warrior finals—a 75-foot rope climb to the top of Mount Midoriyama (as they call it). And so in vv. 20-21 there’s one instruction of sorts—to do God’s will. To do what God purposes, what God desires, what is pleasing in his sight. Which is really a summary of everything we’ve seen in this chapter—the essence of our worship—and everything we’ve been called to in this book—to endure, persevere, hold fast to the gospel. *This is God’s will*—his revealed decree and desire. New covenant worship is not defined primarily by ritual, but by a whole life focused on God’s will to the glory of Christ.

But in this benediction, we’re also reminded of several other critical components: the source of our worship, the means, and the goal.

Perhaps the most critical difference between a ninja competition and finishing our race in Christ is that it’s not our strength that makes following Christ possible; it’s God’s. He is the source. It’s the God of peace who equips us with everything good to do his will. God is not sitting in heaven blowing his whistle and barking at us like an impatient coach; he never calls us to something that he doesn’t himself provide the strength to do by the Holy Spirit.

And he supplies this through Christ—our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, and the blood of the eternal covenant in him. From beginning to end this book has demonstrated the supremacy of Christ—he is better than anything the old covenant could offer, and any cheap substitute we try to come up with today. There is no great Savior, no better priest, period. And it’s his life, death, and resurrection that make a life of worship possible.

And it’s all for his glory. God works his strength in us “through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.” He is the reward; he is our treasure. When we stand at the top of the mountain on that day—not because of our ability, but because of God’s faithfulness and Christ’s grace—it

will be Jesus who receives the praise, not us. There is nothing better than Jesus. May God indeed equip us through him with everything good to do his will for the sake of Christ, that he might be treasured above all things.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **Questions for Study and Understanding**

1. In terms of context, what has the author talked about in previous passages that help us understand what he's talking about now? (Look especially at 12:28-29)
2. What different subjects does the author raise in these verses? Why do you think he brings these up at the end of his letter?
3. Which topics or instructions seem to be most critical for the church today?
4. How would you summarize the main idea of this final chapter?
5. How would you summarize the main idea and main application of the book as a whole?

### **Questions for Reflection and Application**

6. Which instruction in ch. 13 do you find most convicting or timely? How will you seek to put it into practice?
7. What are the biggest lessons you've learned from the book of Hebrews?
8. How has God changed you through this book?