

Hebrews 13:4-14 – We Have an Altar

Chapter 13 contains final exhortations along with some doctrinal statements. We are to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are also to show hospitality to strangers. Today's passage includes additional exhortations. Also, the doctrine of Jesus as our great high priest and his once for all, one and only, sacrifice for sins is discussed further. There are further contrasts between our life under the new covenant and the life of those under the Mosaic law.

Read Hebrews 13:4-6.

The first two phrases of verse 4 do not have a verb in the original text. NKJV supplies "is" as in "marriage is honorable... and the bed undefiled". ESV, NASB and NIV all also supply the verb "to be" but understand it to be a command or exhortation as in "let marriage be [held] in honor... and the marriage bed be [kept] undefiled". Do you think the beginning of verse 4 is an exhortation or is it a declaration about marriage? Does the last phrase about God judging the sexually immoral and adulterers make more sense if the first part of the verse is an exhortation? (13:4)

I remember what verse 4 DOESN'T mean from when I was in Dallas in the 80's. I was roommates with a seminary student. The student was getting married and bought a queen size bed and leaned it on one of the living room walls. It was the only piece of furniture in our living room. I was sleeping on the floor while he already had a single bed. He told me he would like to let me sleep on the bed but he couldn't because of Hebrews 13:4, "let not the marriage bed be defiled". It was a great example to me of how people, even seminary students, twist scripture to meet their desires. The response to my roommate should have been, "Let not the Scriptures be defiled!!!"

In verse 5, what was the exhortation? Is money evil? See 1 Timothy 6:10. What signs are there that contentment is a problem in our society? Why should we be content with what we have? When asked "how much money is enough", John D. Rockefeller famously said "just a little bit more". (13:5)

What Old Testament passages were quoted in verse 6 and at the end of verse 5? See Deuteronomy 31:6 and Psalm 118:6. What perspective do these quotes bring to the idea of being content with what we have? (13:5-6)

Read Hebrews 13:7-14.

In verse 7, what is the exhortation? What leaders are referred to in verse 7? What are we to do when we remember our leaders and consider the outcome of their lives? BDAG says “consider” is to “give careful thought to, consider”. (13:7)

What does verse 8 mean to you? Why do you think the author of Hebrews put this fantastic truth here in the letter? Does this verse look back to verse 7 or does it look forward to verse 9 or both? (13:8)

In verse 2 the exhortation was to show hospitality to strangers. In verse 9 they were not to entertain strange teachings. Are there any hints in this verse about what these strange teachings may have involved? Do you think verse 9 is related to verse 8 and if so, how? BDAG says that “diverse” in this context could mean “ambiguous, crafty, sly, deceitful”. The author again employed contrast when he contrasted being strengthened by grace versus food. What is the significance of this contrast? William L. Lane also sees a contrast between this verse and verse 7. (13:9)

What is the altar which we have? Why were those who served (or worshiped) at the earthly sanctuary not able to eat at “our altar”? What does it mean in this verse to “eat at the altar”? (13:10)

In verse 11, the author once again referenced the Day of Atonement. See Leviticus 16. What part of the Day of Atonement was focused on in this verse? (13:11)

In verse 12, how did Jesus’ death fulfill the pattern of the Day of Atonement? (13:12)

In verse 13, there is a contrast between those within the walls of Jerusalem who are still following the Mosaic law and those outside the walls where Jesus was crucified at Golgotha. What does it mean to go to Jesus outside the camp? What should those who associate with Christ expect in this world? What should Christians expect in the future? (13:13-14)