

Remember Consider And Imitate

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father, we're going to turn our minds to the reading of your Word and reflection upon it and study of it, and we ask that your Holy Spirit will bring to our minds all those things in our own hearts which need to be brought to the light of your Word, and that your Word may lighten and heal us to your glory. Amen.

Passage that you're to look at tonight is Hebrews 13, verse 7, 8, and 9. And it's on page 212 in the Pew Bible, and I think you'd be well advised to turn that up if you can. I just would like to lay some basis of speaking to you tonight. I'm not sure why I was given this passage, because it says something about remember your leaders, the presupposition being that they're now dead and gone.

And I'm happy to still be here tonight. I would say, though, that I am 65 at this point in life, but as I look out at you, I feel at least 370.

[2 : 00] You're very... And the possibility of saying anything intelligible to you seems remote to me, but the Word of God may indeed have its fulfillment by the work of the Holy Spirit.

I wear this collar and this suit to try and retain a certain amount of conservative orthodoxy about life at St. John's. And, uh...

But there's a wonderful verse which helps to equalize you and me, and it's found in the book of Ecclesiasticus on chapter 33 and verse 28.

And almost being certain that few of you could ever find that, I'm going to leave it to you to think about, even without knowing what it says.

But it's helpful to me as I relate to you. It ain't in the Bible you got there, is what I...

[3 : 01] It's in that one if you want to look it up afterwards. It's... Obviously, the statement in this passage that reaches out and grabs you tonight, if you read it at all, is, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Can I just tell you that, uh... If you are very clever and very intelligent and go to university, and you study and do an arts degree, and then you do a master's degree, and then you do a doctorate, in most circumstances, the doctorate they give you will be a PhD.

That is, a doctor of philosophy. And whether you're studying astrophysics, mathematics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, or history, you always end up with a PhD.

The reason for that is that back in the ancient days, long before any of you were born, they thought that a person that achieved that level of education would by that time be primarily not a sociologist, anthropologist, historian, psychologist, sociologist, or one of those things, but that he would primarily be a philosopher.

And so, uh, that his particular studies in a particular field would nevertheless lead him to being, uh, a profound and learned philosopher.

[4 : 49] Now, I tell you this because this is kind of preparatory to looking at these verses, but, uh... Those aren't pills, those are just cough candies.

I don't want... The, uh... The thing about it is this, that, uh...

When you preach a sermon, you almost invariably use some kind of frame of reference, which you may be familiar to the people you're talking to, and from that frame of reference, draw them into some, uh, contemplation or consideration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So that, uh, if you were anthropologists, and I knew that, and then I would perhaps try and take anthropology and show you the relevance of the Gospel. Or if you were sociologists, and that's a very popular subject these days, I might assume on your sociological knowledge to lead you into some understanding of the Gospel.

If you were anthropologists, likewise, or if you were psychologists, likewise. And so, uh, preachers have always done that kind of thing.

[6 : 17] And then, they have, uh, taken a field of study or understanding within which people have some knowledge and, uh, try and draw from them on the basis of their understanding an acknowledgement of the heart of the Gospel.

What's happened over the course of the last, well, uh, hundred years, I suppose, is that, uh, congregations have generally become more convinced about the autonomous validity of psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc., without reference to the Gospel at all.

And the assumption is that these things are the truth, and, uh, whether the Gospel has any bearing on them is doubtful.

And that you don't mess them up by bringing religious considerations, uh, into, uh, focus. Now, the reason I tell you that is because I believe that, ultimately, uh, if you were to take one of those studies, like, say, anthropology, that the ultimate question that the anthropologists have to answer is, who is the man, who is the man, Christ Jesus?

Anthropology is irresponsible until it has answered that question. Psychologists, which, uh, who deal with the soul, um, the question they have to answer is, why is Jesus Christ neither known nor honored by those whom God has created in his own image?

[8 : 24] It has to answer that question, ultimately. And, uh, it may proceed to the point where it thinks that question is irrelevant. But there is a day of judgment, even on psychology.

And what psychology does with that question is of the utmost importance. And that, uh, you see, is why I'm telling you that, uh, this statement from Hebrews 13 is a very important statement.

Because the solid reality which all human knowledge must come up against is that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

And though there is a vast growth in knowledge in the realm of psychology or astrophysics or any other of the sciences, though they are growing all the time and expanding all the time and publishing all the time, the ultimate reality against which they have to come up is Jesus Christ.

Now, the reason they have to do that, and I, uh, want to explain the reason to you, uh, the reason they have to do that is because, uh, of the uniqueness of the person of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 56] Lots of people, you see, think that Jesus Christ is, uh, is, uh, is, uh, that the Christian faith is, uh, is a fine type of human religion.

And there are many other types and many other brands and many other sorts of religion. But that, uh, Christians shouldn't be so exclusive in saying that, uh, there is no other name under heaven given to men, by which we must be saved.

But the reason Christians say that is because there is no one else like Jesus Christ. Uh, and Christianity is fundamentally based on an understanding of who Jesus Christ is.

And, uh, we can't escape from that. You can't explain Christianity in terms of anything but who Jesus Christ is.

Lots of people want to explain Christianity in terms of the misbehavior of the hypocritical people that live next door to them and go to church on Sunday, and they end up with a very negative view of Christianity.

[11 : 15] But Christianity can only be judged by examining the person of Jesus Christ. And you and I are held accountable for doing or not doing that in the course of our lives.

And, uh, that's awesome. Now, having, uh, given you this long introduction, what I'm leading up to is that I want to present to you the argument of a particular philosopher who used his very considerable philosophical knowledge in order to explain what Christianity is, what is at the heart of our faith.

And the philosopher, because when I was young, this was a very, still a very popular thing to do, was to preach the gospel on the basis of the reason and logic which had been learned through philosophy.

And that's what this man does supremely well. And his name is William Temple. And he says that this is what, this is the argument.

And it's a five point argument. And I'm giving you his argument for why we have to be primarily concerned with the person of Jesus Christ.

[12 : 33] Why do we carry on on this subject? Why do we keep singing hymns about it? Why do we keep preaching about it? In a world where the reality of what I'm saying has been dismissed in

the light of the superior knowledge, which the sciences have brought to us.

So this is how his argument goes. Point one, he says, the universe requires for its confirmation a divine act in the midst of history.

So he takes the whole of history and the whole of the universe and says, in order to make any sense of this, there has to be in the center of it, a divine act.

That's his point number one. Point number two, we have found that God is such as to act in a special way if occasion demands.

And that, he says, is how we understand the God of the scriptures. He is a God who is such that he will act in a special way if occasion demands.

[13:58] And so we look at our world, we look at our universe, and he says the third thing you must conclude is, that we have found an occasion which demands such an act.

Such an act is required. God is capable of acting in that way. And there is occasion for him to act in that particular way.

One young lady in the congregation came to see me this week about friends of hers who rejected the whole of Christianity on the basis that suffering in this world was incompatible with any view of God at all.

And that's part of the reason that you have to point them to an act of God in order that they will understand who this God is. So he says that his third point is, we have found an occasion which demands such an act.

Number four, he says, if there is no such act, we must either compose ourselves to await it, as the Jews were taught, to await the coming of the Messiah.

[15:16] In other words, we are a people who are waiting for God to act by the sending of a Messiah, like the Jews. They are a people in waiting for a vindication which they hope will one day come.

That's one possibility, he says. The other possibility is, we must abandon our whole view of life and the world.

And you know that our current culture on the West Coast is one that is prepared to make a very daring experiment of abandoning our whole view of life and the world in the world.

And the world in which we live. And it's quite frightening, the abandon with which they drop the whole view. But that's his fourth point.

Either we're like Jews, awaiting it, or else we are compelled by necessity to abandon it. And then point number five is, he says, there is a record of this divine act, such as the most profound human need requires.

[16:36] He says, this divine act is the story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth and the consequent coming of the Holy Spirit.

This, in the midst of all of history, in the midst of the whole of the universe, is the divine act. And we as a community gather together on the Lord's day to worship the God who has acted in this way in making himself known.

That's why you are here. That you may understand this act and worship the God who has acted in this way.

Now, that's what the church has always been about, is the acknowledgement that God has acted and that he has acted in the incarnation, the life, the trial, the death, the resurrection, ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Now, back to Hebrews 13, verse 7. It tells you how this comes alive in a local congregation.

[18:14] He says, remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God, consider the outcome of their faith and imitate their faith.

So, the three things that we are called upon to do is to remember, to consider, and to imitate.

And the people that we are to remember are the leaders who brought to us the word of God.

Now, the word of God, you see, is the testimony of history from the time of the creation to the book of the Revelation to the divine act, which William Temple talked about and developed in that argument.

That's what our teachers do for us is that they tell us, they bring to us the word of God, which is the testimony to the act of God in Jesus Christ.

[19:25] And so, we are to be in constant remembrance of that. That's why we do things like pray every day and read your Bible every day and be in fellowship regularly and talk one with another

about the things of the Lord.

In order that you may, in your life, in which the pressures are to drive you away from this central reality, to bring back to your mind and heart the central reality of how God has acted in the midst of history in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, you do an enormous service of good to someone by doing what the leaders did, bring to your friends the word of God, which bears testimony to the act of God, which is at the center of history. That's, of course, that's why this church is designed with a cross that you can't really escape from or you can't avoid confronting, because this is where the act of God comes to the supreme moment in history when Christ, God having become man, is nailed to a cross.

So, we need to be in that place.

[21 : 10] Consider the outcome of God. Consider the outcome of their life. In other words, you can look at the Christians who have gone before you, and you are to consider the outcome of their life, which was lived in response to and obedience to the word of God.

You consider the outcome of their lives. There's kind of a pleasant verse, I think, in Acts 17, 23, which you might want to look up, only because it expands on this word consider, and it describes Paul as he considered the city of Athens.

In Acts 17, 23, Paul says, I passed along and observed an object of your worship. I found also an altar with this inscription to an unknown God.

So, Paul walked through and considered the great capital of Greek philosophy, and he saw this all around him, and he thought about it, and he thought, what does it mean?

And as he considered it, he realized that the pinnacle of Greek culture at that point was the acknowledgement of an unknown God.

[22 : 36] You see, his business, which he goes on to fulfill in Acts 17, is to tell them who that unknown God is.

So, they are to remember the leaders. That's why, in the course of the communion service, we remember Douglas, our Metropolitan, and Michael, our Primate, that they might, by life and doctrine, set forth the true and living word, rightly administering the holy sacraments.

So, we pray for them, because that is the supreme function of leadership, to set forth the true and living word. And that's why your leaders are to be honored or respected and remembered, is because they have done that for you.

And so, you remember your leaders for that reason. And then you consider, look again in Acts, or in Hebrews 13, consider the outcome of their life.

In other words, you can look at the whole of their lives. There is a suggestion by one commentator that it's possible that the leaders of the church that the people belong to, to whom this letter was written, had suffered martyrdom.

[24 : 24] They had been put to death. And they, in the faith of Jesus Christ, had died for the cause of Jesus Christ.

And just like we look back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as David tells us to do from time to time, you look at their life, and you see how they lived it in the circumstances that you and I have to live our lives in.

So, we consider how they did it. It, in fact, it is intriguing that it's the same word, which I think appears in 1 Corinthians 10, 11, where it says that there has no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man.

And God has given you a way of escape that you may be able to bear it. And this way of escape that is spoken of is parallel to the way the Christian leaders lived their lives in the midst of the contrary reality of this evil world.

And so they were told to remember, they were told to consider, and then they were told in their lives to imitate that faith, to copy it.

[25 : 51] Now, this is very important because it, one of the realities of your coming together like this and getting to know one another in some depth and becoming part of a community of Christians is that those who are older, those who are your teachers, you can get to know, remembering that they were the ones who brought to you the word of God, considering the way they have lived in this present evil world, and imitating their faith, that you learn to do this by imitation.

Not in a negative and hypocritical sense, but in a, because they set for you such an example. So he says, if you do these three things, remember, consider, imitate, that the foundation for you doing

that is that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Remember, he is the one by whom they live their lives, and he is the one by whom you live your life. You don't live by your relationship to your leader. You live by your relationship to Jesus Christ. And so when they say, remember, consider, imitate, he said, because they knew Jesus Christ, and he was their resource, as he must be yours.

And he says to them, there's a kind of, I think, clarification necessary, which I found helpful when it was pointed out to me, when it says Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

[27 : 52] And that is that the Jesus Christ whom you encounter today is the same Jesus Christ as those who've gone before you have encountered.

And it's the same Jesus Christ that ultimately everyone will be forced to encounter, because he is the same. He is not going to change.

This is the once and for all divine act of God in history, which focuses in the person of Jesus Christ. And coming up against that reality is what is at the heart of your life, that is the function of your leaders, and that is the basis of your faith, that you come up against Jesus Christ.

Then you see, he goes on to say, but there's another alternative that happens to too many people, and that is, in verse 9, they are led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is well that the heart be strengthened by grace and not by foods.

[29 : 08] So what comes into the church all the time is diverse and strange teachings, colorful, various, brand new, and you go after this teaching, and you go after that teaching, and you follow this teaching, and you find this teaching, and people go around looking for these various teachings which surround us in our world in great abundance.

And so what you get is you get an infinite variety, a changing pattern, a constantly changing pattern of teaching, on the one hand, and on the other hand, you get Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

And he says, that's the thing that you have to recognize is the tension for you in the world in which you live. And you have to make sure that by remembering your leaders, those who brought to you the word of God, considering what they taught you, considering the way they lived before you, and imitating their faith, you might get hold of the same essential reality which they had hold of and which had hold of them, and that you won't spend your life as so many people do, and just waste the whole of their lives in an eager search for diverse and strange teachings which they go after with a ravenous epitaph.

Now, you see, what happens is that the divine act, which is at the center of all human reality, is God incarnate in Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And what your life is about is encountering that reality. And I call it that reality. But of course, I should say that person, the person of Jesus Christ.

[31 : 48] Because they don't say, put your mind on this shelf and leave it there. They say, meet this person and live in obedience to him and in relationship to him.

And so that, you know, you may think that Christian faith for you is an endless search for new teaching.

It isn't. It's a consolidation of what you have been taught, what has been demonstrated to you, and what you must seek to imitate in response to your encounter with the divine act, who is Jesus Christ.

And that's how you and I are to live our lives. And that's why our life is basically, well, it's an encounter of faith in Jesus Christ.

Or an encounter with judgment by Jesus Christ. There is no escape for which we should say, praise be to God.

[33 : 21] Amen.