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Hebrews #44

Eat Grace!

Hebrews 13:7-14

How's your heart? No, I don't mean that organ in your chest. I'm not asking if you've recently suffered cardiac arrest. I'm not asking for information about your pulse rate or your white blood count or how high or low your cholesterol may be. I have no interest today in the results of your most recent electrocardiogram or how many times your heart beats in a minute. And I'm not interested in your family's history of heart disease. None of this means that I don't care about your physical health. Far less does it mean that *you* shouldn't care. Of course you should. Your physical body is a gift from God and serves as the temple of the Holy Spirit. You must be diligent to take good care of your body. Don't neglect your physical health.

But today my concern is with your "heart" as it is understood by the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 13:9. When the Bible talks about the immaterial or spiritual dimension of who we are as those created in God's image, it uses a lot of different terms: *soul, spirit, mind, will, and affections are the most prominent. But when the Bible wants to talk about all of them at once it typically uses the word "heart"*.

Contrary to what many have suggested, *the heart is not the opposite of the head*, as if to suggest that when our author talks about our heart being "strengthened" it excludes our intellectual or thinking capacity. In fact, often in Scripture the word "heart" is synonymous with the "mind". For example, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (Ps. 19:14). "Why do you think evil in your hearts?" (Mt. 9:4; cf. Rom. 1:21; other texts where "heart" means "mind" are 2 Cor. 4:6; 9:7; Eph. 1:18).

At other times "heart" refers to the "emotions" or "passions" "or affections" or "will". In other words, the heart refers to *the center of the personality: thinking, feeling, believing, willing, fearing, trusting, grieving, rejoicing, hoping, yearning. The heart is the center and core of our souls, the fount of our inner being. Thus we read, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life"* (Prov. 4:23).

Your “heart” therefore is the inner you, not the outer you. The heart is the seat and center of your personality. So, let me ask my question again: How’s your heart? Is your *thinking* aligned with God’s revelation in Scripture? Are you *hoping* in him alone? Are you *choosing* what is good and godly? Do you *enjoy* Christ as your supreme satisfaction? Do you long and *yearn* for what is righteous and honoring to the Lord? Does your heart *grieve* over sin? Do you reverently *fear* God?

All these questions are designed to assess the condition of your heart. Or, if I may use the language of our author here in Hebrews 13, ***is your heart strong or weak?*** You may feel physically tired today at the same time your heart is alive and energetic. You may feel physically strong and powerful today at the same time your heart is sick and struggling. I’ve talked with people on their death bed who’ve said, “Sam, my heart is strong and full of joy.” And I’ve talked with healthy, world-class athletes who’ve said, “Sam, my heart is heavy and sad.”

Don’t dismiss all this as irrelevant to your life and of no importance. Look closely at v. 9. Our author says that it is ***“good”*** that our hearts be strengthened. Which means, conversely, that it is bad when our hearts feel sick and weak and are devoid of hope and joy. To have a strong heart is something you should want and earnestly pursue. And if your heart is weak you should take whatever steps are necessary to regain your spiritual strength.

There are a lot of things that can weaken your heart: fear of man, pride, unrepentant sin, self-reliance, putting your hope in human achievement rather than in what God has done for you in Christ. But here in Hebrews 13:9 it appears that ***our hearts are weakened when we embrace or believe “strange teachings” or unbiblical doctrines*** that are inconsistent with the revelation God has made to us of himself in the unchanging, immutable Christ (v. 8).

We talked briefly about this last week. I pointed out to you that contrary to what many people say, it really does matter ***what*** you believe. A lot of people today argue that what you believe is secondary at best. It’s ***how*** you believe that counts. In other words, so long as you are sincere, whether or not what you believe is actually true is not that important.

Our author (and the whole of the Bible!) begs to differ. Strange teachings, deviant doctrines, ideas that don’t align with what God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ can weaken the heart; perhaps even kill it.

One particular “strange teaching” that had emerged in the first century and was threatening some of the people to whom this letter was written concerned **food**.

Now, before I go any further, and before I get myself into a lot of trouble, I need to say something that I hope you can hear. ***Neither the author of Hebrews nor I are saying that it doesn't matter what you eat and drink.*** Christians have strong opinions about the kinds of food people should eat and the kinds they should avoid. I hear and read about it all the time . . . debates over genetically modified food versus organically produced; debates over what foods increase or conversely decrease cholesterol; debates over whether our cholesterol count even matters; debates over the presence of salt in our diet; debates about anti-oxidants and carbohydrates and calories. And the list could go on endlessly regarding caffeine, sugar, fat, whether or not vitamins actually help or even hurt us, food supplements, aspartame, . . . etc., etc.

As far as I'm concerned there is only one unbreakable rule about food and what is ultimately either good for you or bad for you: don't eat squash! Anything that tastes that reprehensible has to be bad for you!

Seriously, though, nothing that I say from this point on should be interpreted by anyone here as if I'm suggesting that it doesn't matter what you eat and drink in terms of its impact on your physical health. The “strange teaching” that our author has in mind is the idea that ***certain kinds of food are inherently more godly or more Christian or more spiritual than others. It's the idea that what I eat will either enhance or detract from my relationship with God.***

What our author is telling us is that there is nothing intrinsically more spiritual about eating red meat than there is in being a vegetarian. There is nothing in salt or the absence of it that makes God love you more or less. There is nothing in organically grown foods that will result in greater rewards in heaven than there is in genetically modified foods.

But sometimes, as was obviously the case in the first century, ***the question of what one eats or doesn't eat or what one drinks or doesn't drink becomes a spiritual obsession. People invest in certain foods or drinks a spiritual value that quite simply does not exist.*** In 1 Corinthians 8:8 Paul said: “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off [spiritually] if we do not eat, and no better off [spiritually] if we do.” ***So we are being warned here in Hebrews 13 not to elevate issues of diet and nutrition and certain kinds of food and drink to a place where we begin to put our hope in them for our spiritual well-being and acceptance with God rather than in the person and work of Jesus Christ.***

Given the fact that the book of Hebrews is designed to teach us that the Old Covenant system under Moses has been abolished and that we now live under the New Covenant established by Jesus Christ, what may be uppermost in his mind here in v. 9 is the tendency of some in the church to elevate ***Jewish dietary regulations*** to a level of spiritual superiority. In other words, some people in the church of Rome in the first century were inclined to insist that everyone continue to observe the commands and prohibitions on food set forth in the Mosaic Law, as if by observing those regulations we are spiritually blessed or more highly favored by God or more capable of resisting the temptations of Satan or some such thing. ***True holiness and true purity are dependent, so they would say, on what you eat and don't eat.***

The apostle Paul was quite clear on this point when he said to the church in Rome: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself (except for squash)" (Rom. 14:14). Again, in 1 Timothy he refers to the "teachings of demons," one aspect of which is that God requires "abstinence from foods" which he "created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Timothy 4:3). Paul goes on to say that "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:4-5).

O.K., enough of that. ***What's important here isn't what you eat physically but what you eat spiritually.*** The heart is strengthened not by meat or vegetables or salt or the lack of it, but by grace! What does he mean here when uses the word "***grace***" (v. 9)? I think he has two things in mind.

First, by "grace" he means the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts. Grace is far more than a principle according to which God saves us. It is certainly that, and I don't want to take away anything from that truth. Grace often in Scripture means the truth or principle according to which God treats us infinitely better than we deserve. We call this the unmerited favor of God. But ***grace is more than a principle: it is a power!*** Grace is the Holy Spirit in us, working through us, sustaining and strengthening our hearts to believe and choose and live in a way that is pleasing to God.

Observe how the book of Hebrews ends. We read in Hebrews 13:25 – "***Grace be with all of you.***" That is not some standard way of saying good-bye. We close our letters with things like: "Cordially" or "Best regards" or some such literary convention. That's not what our author means.

In every one of Paul's letters he opens by saying, ***"Grace be unto you."*** And he concludes each of his letters with the same statement that we find in Hebrews 13:25 – ***"Grace be with you."*** In other words, as you open God's Word and read its contents, "grace" comes to you. Grace is the power of God released into your life through the Scriptures. And when you close God's Word, the grace it imparted to you now goes "with" you to uphold and strengthen and sustain you in your Christian life.

I could give you countless examples of what I mean, but let's take just two more. In James 4 we read:

"But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:6).

Clearly in this passage and many like it "grace" is something that God imparts or bestows or infuses into us to equip and empower us to live in accordance with his will. And that is surely part of what our author means here in Hebrews 13. Your "heart" is to be "strengthened" by the power of grace.

Or consider what Jesus said to the apostle Paul after he had prayed three times that his thorn in the flesh be removed:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Second, "grace" is also a way of referring to the totality of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection. And that is clearly a large part of what he has in mind here in v. 9. We know this from what follows in vv. 10-12.

"Those who serve the tent" (v. 10b) is a reference to the Levitical priests who continue to observe the laws of the old covenant concerning sacrifices to God. Because of their unbelief, because of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and the fulfillment of the old covenant sacrifices, they have no access to our "altar" (v. 10a). This "altar" from which we eat is not a reference to a physical table or piece of furniture. It is a reference to the cross of Jesus Christ from which come all the blessings of salvation and forgiveness and grace. Jesus, in his life, death on the cross, and resurrection, is the fulfillment of all OT Levitical rituals and sacrifices. Thus the table or altar of grace for us who believe is the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross.

The argument of the entire book of Hebrews is that ***the old system of Judaism as it was conceived under Moses has been fulfilled and replaced by the new covenant of Jesus Christ***. If you insist on remaining behind under Moses, living under the laws of the old covenant and trusting in its sacrifices and worshipping in its temple, you have no access to eat grace at the Christian altar where alone full and final forgiveness may be found. But if you will come to Christ and trust him alone you will discover the reality of salvation and the power of God's Holy Spirit to live a new life and worship in a new way.

If your heart needs to be strengthened, if you are buckling under the weight of sin and guilt and shame and defeat, don't put your hope in your strict observance of Jewish food laws. In terms of how this applies to us today, don't rush off to the kitchen and stuff your body with goodies. Don't trust in sweet-tasting food or healthy physical nutrients to find spiritual strength for your heart. Instead go to the altar of grace where you will find forgiveness and hope and joy and peace and the power of the Holy Spirit.

In v. 11 our author refers to the Day of Atonement when, unlike other sacrifices and offerings in the Levitical system, the bodies of the sacrificial animals were not eaten by the high priest but were taken outside the camp of Israel and burned. The word "so" with which v. 12 begins (more literally, "therefore" or "for this reason") is our author's way of saying that ***Jesus is the fulfillment of that symbolic or prophetic action***.

In other words, Jesus has fulfilled the sacrificial system of the old covenant. It does no one any good any longer to trust in those blood offerings or to eat the meat of the sacrificial animals. Rather, one must now come to the only altar where full forgiveness and salvation may be found: the cross of Jesus Christ. And when you come to that altar, eat all the grace you can get!

Some of you struggle with the temptation to deal with your shame and guilty conscience and depression and anxiety by running to the altar called a refrigerator. There you stuff your bodies with all manner of food, thinking that it will put your heart at peace, foolishly hoping that it will quiet the condemning voice of your soul. You've bought into the lie that it will make you feel good about yourself and your relationship with God. And sometimes it does. Food has that effect. Excessive drinking can cause your worries to disappear. But it's always only temporary. It never lasts. The inescapable fact is that you will always get hungry again and thirsty again.

But it's not enough for me simply to say: Stop it! The fact is, ***your soul is still hungry***. So eat grace! Draw deeply upon the benefits of Christ's sinless life. Trust that he lived in perfect

obedience to God in a way that you never could. Trust that he suffered the penalty for your sins that you otherwise would have been required to endure. Eat the grace of forgiveness that he obtained for you. Eat the grace of peace and joy and hope that trusting in Christ alone can provide. Nothing that you physically eat or don't eat or drink or don't drink will ever do for your restless heart what Christ can do.

When you wake up in the morning and your spirit feels empty and alone and devoid of value and meaning, don't ever think that pancakes or candy bars will make it all better. When you wake up hating your life and everyone around you, don't think that exercise is the answer. And I assure you that although a multi-vitamin may prove physically helpful, it can do absolutely nothing to enhance your spiritual status in the eyes of God. ***Strengthen your heart and restore your hope by eating grace, by ingesting all that God is for you in Jesus.***

Earlier in Hebrews 13 we were exhorted to love one another (v. 1). We were told how important it is to show hospitality to strangers (v. 2). We were commanded to be attentive to the needs of those in jail because of their faith (v. 3) and to honor marriage by avoiding sexual impurity (v. 4). We were told to keep our lives free from the love of money and to be content with what we have (v. 5). To do all that requires strength. And the only place where strength like that can be found in endless supply is at the altar of the cross of Jesus Christ. There are endless helpings of that spiritual food. You can come back for seconds and thirds and fourths and eat until you can't eat anymore.

Was last week an ugly one for you? Are you still burdened by the failures in your marriage and in your relationships with others? Are you feeling hopeless because everyone seems to be against you? Do you feel defiled and unqualified and broken by your sin? If so, ***God offers you limitless helpings of grace.*** The first is the cross of Christ and the assurance that everything you need to live in joy and peace and the confidence that your sins are forever and finally forgiven is found there. The second helping is in the daily power that the Holy Spirit provides to enable you to make the right choices and to resist the temptation to trust in food and drink for happiness and the power to say no to sexual temptation.

So, once again I say: eat grace!

Let us go to him outside the camp

Our author isn't done yet. In vv. 12-14 he draws a profound conclusion from the death of Christ that should change forever how we view our lives in this world.

He tells us in v. 12 that when Jesus was crucified it was "outside the gate" or beyond the city limits of Jerusalem. During the time of the old covenant of Moses the camp of Israel and eventually Jerusalem itself was considered holy ground. Everything beyond its borders was considered unholy or profane. The bodies of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, were taken outside the camp after they were judged and killed for offering up strange fire on the altar. If someone blasphemed God they were stoned outside the camp (Lev. 24:14,23). When Miriam, the sister of Moses, was stricken with leprosy, she had to spend seven days outside the camp (Num. 12:14ff.). After the sins of the people were symbolically laid on the head of the scapegoat it had to be taken outside the camp (Lev. 16).

Thus the fact that Jesus was crucified outside the gate or the camp is a sign or indication that *he was rejected by the people of Israel and was regarded as unholy and shameful. The stigma and reproach of having been crucified was vividly seen in his having suffered outside the city of Jerusalem.* How extraordinarily ironic that we should now be told that it was precisely on this unsanctified, unholy, profane ground that God's Holy One, Jesus, should die in order to sanctify and set apart for himself the people of God. The point is that *the cross of Christ has transformed what was unholy into that which is now holy.*

The application of this is two-fold.

First, to the Hebrews to whom this letter was addressed, they are being told that *as long as they remain within old covenant Judaism they cannot eat at the altar of God's grace in Jesus Christ.* They must leave the old covenant and embrace the new covenant. *If they are to share in the salvation that Christ has obtained they must renounce their trust and confidence in the sacrifices and rituals of the old covenant system and put their hope and trust in Jesus Christ who is himself the fulfillment of all that came before. They must sever themselves from the now outmoded Mosaic system and cleave unto Christ in whom that system has been fulfilled.* Don't look to the priesthood of Aaron. Don't put your hope in the feasts and rituals of the old covenant. Put your trust entirely in him to whom all such religious practices pointed: Jesus!

Second, we are also being called to share in the reproach that Jesus endured (v. 13). Today we don't have a literal "camp" or "city" outside of which we are to go. So the "camp" must represent or symbolize something else for us. I think it points to *everything we regard as safe and secure and respectable.* To go "outside the camp" is to move beyond the comfort and

acceptance that this world offers us. Inside the camp, inside the city gates, is where we find familiarity and ease and affirmation and respect from this world and its value system. To follow Jesus outside the camp is to embrace and bear the shame and reproach he suffered. ***To join Jesus outside the camp is to willingly identify with him in his suffering and to move out among the lost and unbelieving people of this world.*** It's only outside the camp that we will find the unreached people of the world.

And the only thing that makes this a reasonable thing to do is the simple but glorious truth stated in v. 14. There we read that we do this "because" here "we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (v. 14). We can joyfully embrace the reproach that Jesus himself endured because we are looking for the city to come, the heavenly Jerusalem that God has prepared for his people who trust him and put their hope in him.

This is something we've seen repeatedly in Hebrews. Do you recall in Hebrews 10:34 that Christians are described as having "joyfully accepted the plundering" of their property because they knew they "had a better possession and an abiding one"? They were seeking a city that is to come; a city that has foundations; the eternal and heavenly Jerusalem on the new earth. Knowing this was theirs, they gladly suffered for the sake of aiding and supporting other Christians.

We saw it in Hebrews 11:25-26 where Moses "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward." The reward is the heavenly Jerusalem, the place of God's eternal dwelling with his people on the new earth.

What we are reading here isn't substantially different from what Jesus said in Luke 9:23-24 – "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." It is very much like what Paul meant in Philippians 3:10 when he spoke of sharing "his sufferings" and becoming "like him in his death."

"But Sam, I don't know if I can do it. I'm not courageous by nature. I'm self-protective. I'm timid. I like the comfort of my surroundings. I'm terrified of the ridicule and rejection I would experience if I stood up for Jesus and made my commitment to him known. What can I do to overcome this fear?"

Answer: ***Eat more grace!*** Jesus died and rose again to provide us with the power and gracious incentive to follow him outside the camp and to endure slander and reproach and suffering so that the gospel might be advanced throughout the world.

As John Piper has said,

“this way of thinking—this willingness to go outside the camp of comfort and security—is a very strange mentality. It's not natural to this world. What is it? Is it naïveté about what pain and suffering are really like? Is it a kind of pathological masochism that just wants people to feel sorry for us? Is it stoical heroics that hopes to be remembered in the hall of fame? What is this willingness to go outside the camp to Jesus and bear the abuse he did?

Verse 14 gives the answer. ‘For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.’ Our willingness to live and work with Jesus outside the camp of comfort and security is not naïveté. It is not a pathological desire to suffer. It is not stoical heroics. It is, in fact, an unshakable and happy confidence that there is no abiding security and happiness in this world but only in the next. The pleasures and safety of upscale Minneapolis [or Oklahoma City] and suburbia cannot compare to the pleasures of the New Jerusalem.”

Conclusion

So how does one eat more grace?

(1) Dig ever more deeply into the nature and reality of the cross of Christ: its necessity, its meaning, its accomplishment. Reflect and meditate often on what it means for you individually.

(2) Memorize and rehearse in your mind throughout the course of every day the most powerful of NT texts on the cross of Christ, such as Galatians 2:20; Romans 5:6-11; Romans 8:32; 1 John 2:1-2, etc.

(3) Pray relentlessly and fervently for the reality of God’s love for you in Christ to strengthen your inner being. We don’t instinctively or by nature believe or embrace or trust in the reality of

God's love. That is why Paul devoted so much time praying for it in his own life and in the lives of others. See Ephesians 3:14-21.

(4) Devote yourself to thanking and praising God for his grace. Worship!

(5) Avail yourselves of the means of grace, those activities and events and spiritual tools that God has ordained as the means or instrument through which his empowering grace is imparted to our hearts: the Word, prayer, Lord's Supper, mutual encouragement and fellowship of others, worship, meditation, etc.