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Bridgeway Church
Hebrews #47

Command What You Will, and Give What You Command
Hebrews 13:20-25

G. K. Chesterton, turn of the century British author, Roman Catholic, and journalist, once famously said: ***“Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried.”*** Each time I hear those words I have the same feeling of ambivalence rise up in my heart. In other words, I find myself wanting to say to Chesterton, “Well, Yes, . . . but, then again, No.”

My reason for that response is this. On the one hand, Chesterton is most assuredly correct when he says that people often investigate Christianity and find it “difficult”. Christians find it difficult! After all, we encounter some pretty demanding ethical and spiritual guidelines in the Bible. Immediately there comes to mind exhortations like:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom. 12:14).

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all” (Rom. 12:17).

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom. 12:19).

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

“Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Eph. 5:4).

“Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18a).

I could go on almost without end but I trust you get the picture. I trust you understand why Chesterton was right when he said that people don't so much try Christianity and find it lacking but rather have found it difficult and so left it untried.

But there's another thing in that statement that I have to dispute. I don't know if Chesterton would agree with me when I say this, but in another sense Christianity is *not* difficult. I'm not saying that these commands that I've read to you and the numerous others are in and of themselves easy. I'm not naïve about how prone all of us are to do precisely the opposite of what we are told to do in the Bible. The fact of the matter is that all of us, whether Christian or not, are prone by nature to hate our enemies and to seek vengeance when they do us wrong. We are all by nature predisposed to commit sexual immorality and to make use of whatever filthy, foolish, and crude language we can get away with.

So how do I get off saying that living a Christian life isn't difficult? What I mean by that, again, isn't that these exhortations and commandments and the moral standard given to us in Scripture are inherently easy for us to obey. They aren't. ***What I mean is that God himself has taken steps to assure us that for any and every task that he's called us to fulfill he will provide the necessary power and resources so that we can be successful in it.***

I've already quoted one famous Christian thinker today, G. K. Chesterton. So let me quote yet another, St. Augustine. In his spiritual autobiography, entitled *The Confessions*, Augustine says to God: ***"Command what you will, and give what you command."***

Now, what does he mean by that, and is it biblical? I think he means that together with whatever God commands us to do comes the power and motivation and incentive to do it. Or again, in tandem with the ethical responsibility comes the spiritual energy to obey it. My former spiritual mentor, Russ McKnight, now with the Lord, said much the same thing when he articulated this principle: ***Whatever God requires, God provides.***

What all this means is that God doesn't tell us what to do and then hang us out to dry. He doesn't give us a life to live and then abandon us to our own devices. He doesn't exhort us to conduct ourselves in a particular manner and then leave us to drum up the power and figure it out on our own and find the inner strength to pull ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps.

No. If God requires something of us, he also supplies everything necessary to make it possible for us to obey him. Or to use Augustine's language, if God commands us to do something, he gives to us whatever resources and power and incentive are needed to fulfill his will.

Let me try to illustrate what I have in mind. God is not merely a cheerleader. God does not stand off to the side of your life and yell loudly for you to try harder and run faster and jump higher, spiritually speaking. Neither is God a coach, who at most can give you instructions on how to perform on the athletic field. Make no mistake. God does cheer for you and God does coach you. But he does far more. Through the Holy Spirit he actually enters into your mind and soul and spirit and empowers you beyond what you are naturally and normally capable of doing. God can tell you what to do and not to do because he quite literally lives in you to sustain your heart and enlighten your mind and strengthen your will to fulfill what he requires.

Now all that sounds wonderful, but is it biblical? Yes, it is. Let me mention several texts among many that make this point crystal clear. The first is Philippians 2:12-13.

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13).

Paul calls on the Philippians (and us) to work out our salvation knowing that our energy and enthusiasm and exertion are all the fruit of a miracle in our hearts that has already taken place. ***We work out the Christian life, or act in obedience to the Word of God, only because God has already been at work within, performing a miracle in our lives.***

You’ve heard me say this before, but here it is again: When it comes to the Christian life, ***God is always antecedent***. He comes *first*. He acts *before* we act. We only act because he has *already* acted. God works in us *in advance* of our working for him. To put it in slightly different terms, God is always *prior*. He is earlier in time and order. His working is the *cause* of which our willing is the *effect*. I hope that’s clear.

So, Paul is not telling us to sit idly by, twiddling our spiritual thumbs, passively waiting until some inner urge stirs us to act. He is saying quite the opposite. ***Get up and get to work with the confidence that what just prompted and empowered you to do so was God antecedently at work in your heart.***

Paul is not saying that God is working in our place, as if to say he’s doing the work so we don’t have to. God himself does not work in children’s ministry so that you don’t have to. God himself does not greet visitors with a smile and a warm embrace so that you don’t have to. God himself does not attend a small group or pray for the sick so that you don’t have to. Rather, God is supplying us with the power so that **we** can perform the work.

It's also important for us to see that Paul **doesn't** say, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling **so that** God might then go to work in you." God's working in us is *not the divine response to our acting but the divine cause of our acting*. God doesn't act in us as a reward for our having first acted for him. God's working in us is the cause and the explanation for how we find it possible to work out our salvation. God's work in us is always antecedent. His work comes first. The word "for" is Paul's way of putting these two realities in proper order. *God's working in us is the cause. Our working out our salvation is the effect.*

When God works antecedently in you, it doesn't make your effort unnecessary; it makes it possible. God performs a miracle in your heart in order that you might obey his Word.

Yet another text which makes the same point also comes from the Apostle Paul:

"I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).

Paul worked hard. He labored long. He struggled and strained more than all the others combined. And when he was done, and wiped the sweat from his brow, he declared that it was all of God. It was all of grace.

Or consider what Paul said in Romans 8:32 –

"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

The "all things" that God has assured he will give us is whatever is necessary to enable us to live in obedience to him and fully satisfied in his Son, Jesus Christ. Nothing that is required to experience optimum joy in Jesus will be withheld from us.

But of course the biblical text that supports my thesis today is right here in Hebrews 13:20-21.

"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything

good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21).

What an incredibly glorious and encouraging way to bring this letter to a close! Think about some of the things our author has exhorted us to do. Here is a small sampling:

We must “pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (Heb. 2:1).

We were told to “hold fast” to our “confidence” in Christ (Heb. 3:6).

“Take care . . . lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).

So how do I know that I won’t yield to an unbelieving heart and fall away from the living God? You know because God has pledged by the blood and resurrection of Jesus Christ that he will “equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in [you] . . . that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.”

Here are some other exhortations we’ve encountered during our time in Hebrews:

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (Heb. 4:14).

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:22a).

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

“Let brotherly love continue” (Heb. 13:1).

“Keep your life free from the love of money” (Heb. 13:5a).

It would be extremely easy and feel ever so natural simply to throw our hands in the air and give up, shouting loudly: “I can’t do this! It’s too much for me! I’m too weak. I’m too frail. I’m too selfish.” And our author knows that. He feels it too. That’s why vv. 20-21 are so incredibly encouraging and uplifting. These two verses tell us that God knows it too. That’s why he reminds us here that whatever he has required of us in the letter to the Hebrews, he provides. Whatever he commands, he gives.

Be sure that you understand this one thing: *Whatever you fail to do that God has commanded, you alone are to blame; and whatever you fulfill that God has commanded, God alone is to be praised.*

There are several ways we could go about unpacking and explaining these two verses, but as we bring our series in Hebrews to a close today I want to approach it by taking note of what it tells us about God.

What is God like?

There are seven things I want you to see.

(1) *Our God is a peaceable and peace-giving God!* He is here described as “the God of peace”. On the one hand, this may say that he gives us peace to experience and enjoy, and that is certainly true. But I think the focus is more on God who makes peace with us and who is himself characterized in his own inner being by peace.

We know he has made “peace” with us because of the shed blood of Christ mentioned here in v. 20. The only reason that God is not still angry with us and hostile toward us is because our sin and guilt which created the animosity to begin with has been cleansed and forgiven by the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross. We are no longer at war with God because he has made peace with us through the blood of his Son. This has been one of the primary themes of the book of Hebrews.

But to say that our God is “the God of peace” also means that he himself experiences peace in his own inner being. The only reason God can make peace with us and in turn give us the experience of peace is because he himself is a peaceful God.

(2) *Our God is a life-giving God!* We know this because he “brought again from the dead” Jesus Christ and will eventually bring to life again all of us, his children, after we have died.

(3) *Our God is a loving and sacrificial God!* We know this because the basis or grounds on which he raised Jesus from the dead is the sacrifice of the cross where his precious blood was shed. It is from beginning to end a work of grace. It was God’s grace and sacrificial love that moved him to send his Son to die in our place and it was the grace and sacrificial love of Jesus himself in willingly shedding his blood that fully and finally secures our forgiveness.

(4) *Our God is a covenant-keeping God!* Note well that it isn’t simply blood that was shed. A lot of blood was shed throughout the time of the Old Testament. We’ve seen this repeatedly in Hebrews, with countless references to and descriptions of the blood of bulls and goats and spotless lambs. But not all the blood in the world could atone for sin, not even yours or mine. The only blood that availed for us was the blood of Jesus Christ that was poured out in fulfillment of the New Covenant, the Eternal Covenant that God made with us through Christ. This is the covenant described back in Hebrews 8:8-12.

On the night he was betrayed Jesus broke the bread and distributed the cup as a sign of the new and eternal covenant that his blood would inaugurate and establish: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; see 1 Cor. 11:25). How can we know with absolute certainty and assurance that God will keep his word in the new and eternal covenant to forgive our sins and be our God and never leave us or forsake us? We can know because the covenant was signed, sealed, established, and delivered on the foundation of the blood of God’s very own, dear Son Jesus Christ.

One of the most glorious and reassuring promises of the Old Testament concerns this new and everlasting covenant that God said he would establish with us:

“I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (Jer. 32:40).

At the very center of this covenant promise is God’s determination to continually do good for us and never let any of his blood-bought children fully and finally turn away from him.

(5) *Our God is a sheep-Shepherding God!* Whereas it is true that here in v. 20 Jesus is the “great shepherd of the sheep,” so too is God the Father. They cannot be separated or divided in their role to shepherd or pastor and care for us.

And know this: he has been your Shepherd from the beginning and will continue to be your Shepherd throughout all eternity.

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:24-25).

He doesn't cease to be our Shepherd once we are saved and restored. When he returns at the Second Coming he will come not only as living Lord and loving Bridegroom and conquering King but also as our Shepherd. We see this in 1 Peter 5:4,

“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pt. 5:4).

And still throughout the eternal ages to come, Jesus will continue to be our Shepherd, for we read this in Revelation 7:16-17,

“They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:16-17).

Last week I spoke about the responsibility of Elders and Pastors to lead and guide and protect and feed you spiritually. I also mentioned that sometimes, tragically, even Elders can go rogue. Although we are called to “shepherd” or “pastor” the flock here at Bridgeway, your greatest and most glorious and always faithful Shepherd is Jesus Christ. He will never fail you. He will never manipulate you. He will never abuse you or abandon you to wolves or exploit you or fail to show up when you need him most.

If these other texts haven't made the point that our God is a good, kind, loving Shepherd, perhaps the portrayal of him in Isaiah 40:11 will:

“He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40:11).

(6) Our God is a sinner-sanctifying God! He is an equipping, enabling, empowering God!

Notice that he says this twice, as if to reinforce to us how crucial and how true it is. **First**, the prayer is that God would “equip you with everything good that you may do his will” (v. 21a). The promise isn’t that he will make you rich and famous, or that you will always be spared from suffering or disappointment. The promise of the eternal covenant is that God will do everything necessary in your heart and mind to enable you to do his will.

What this means is that:

You don’t have to live any longer in unforgiveness. God can equip you with every good thought and affection and determination to do his will when it comes to forgiving those who have sinned against you.

You don’t have to live in bondage to lust. God can equip you with the strength to resist the temptation to look lustfully at another person.

You don’t have to live in bitterness and anger. God can equip you with power to recognize the countless blessings you have in Christ and free you from the habit of constantly berating your spouse or your children.

You don’t have to live in the clutches of pornography. God can equip you and empower you to turn off the computer. He can equip and empower you to set your sights and affections on the beauty of Christ in place of your infatuation with the allure of sexual immorality.

You don’t have to live in constant hatred and resentment of your spouse. No matter how deep the wounds may be, no matter how often he/she has berated you, God can equip and empower you to love as Christ has loved you.

Whatever God’s will is, the promise of his covenant with you in Christ is that he can equip you with everything good so that you might live in obedience to it.

Then notice how he says it a **second** time. He is committed to “working in us that which is pleasing in his sight” (v. 21b).

Psalm 23 says that as our great Shepherd God will lead us beside still waters and will bring refreshment to our souls. And that's great! But he does far more. As our Shepherd he also promises to work within us or inside us so that we can actually do what pleases him. As I said, God is not a cheerleader or coach who can merely shout encouragement or instructions from without. ***He works within***, stirring our hearts, enlightening our minds, energizing our wills, sustaining and preserving us in faith so that when we hear his commands we do not respond with anger or fear or resentment or despair but with joy and excitement knowing that whatever he requires of us, he provides for us.

Before I leave this I want you to see one more thing that doesn't come across in your English translation. Literally, we are told in v. 21 that God equips us to ***“do”*** his will by ***“doing”*** in us what pleases him. The words translated “do” and “doing” are the same in Greek. We ***“work”*** because God ***“works”***. When we “do” his will it is because he is “doing” in us what is pleasing to himself.

That is why I can only partially agree with what Chesterton said. Yes, Christianity is difficult. In fact, apart from the internal enabling power of the Holy Spirit it is impossible. But for those who have been redeemed and cleansed and forgiven by the blood of the new and eternal covenant, all things are possible! For our Shepherd is “doing” inside of us everything necessary for us to “do” his will!

And this is what leads to and accounts for the seventh and final thing that is said of God.

(7) Our God is a Christ-exalting God!

He does all of this for the “glory” and praise and honor of Jesus! If it is “through” or because of Jesus that God does this in our hearts, it only stands to reason that he, not we, should receive all the praise and credit and honor for what is done.

We get the care and he gets the credit!

Conclusion

So, as we bring our time in Hebrews to a close, let us rejoice and give thanks that our God is a:

Peaceable and peace-giving God!

Life-giving God!

Loving and Sacrificial God!

Covenant-keeping God!

Sheep-Shepherding God!

Sinner-Sanctifying God!

Christ-exalting God!