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Hebrews 13:7-8, 17-21

Pentecost 7B

Their Words are God's Words

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. 8Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever...17Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you. 18Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. 19I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon. 20Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, 21equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Dear friends in Christ our Savior, God sends different people into our lives to bless us in different ways. Martin Luther had an interesting perspective on this. Luther said that God masks himself to interact with humankind and to bless us. It's an interesting concept. God wants us to know him and he wants to bless us, but he just can't show himself to us in all his glory. As sinful people that would literally kill us. So when God wants to reveal himself to us, he does it by hiding himself. When God wants to bring blessings to us, he comes to us with his glory and power hidden by masking himself in other people. God sends doctors and nurses into our lives to help us be healthy physically. He sends financial planners to help us manage the money he blesses us with. He sends garbage people to take away our trash. He sends mail people to bring us our mail. He sends entertainers to give us relief and rest. He sends teachers to help guide us and grow in our knowledge so we can succeed in this world. God masks himself in different people to bless us in different ways. Today, God focuses our attention on those whom he has sent into our lives to bring us the greatest blessing. The physical blessings and possessions we have are certainly wonderful gifts from God. But even unbelievers and pagans receive those blessings from God. We could receive more of them than anyone else and still not

be right with God. The biggest blessing we could possibly have is to stand before God in peace through the forgiveness of sins and salvation which is ours in Jesus. It is the forgiveness won by Jesus and given to us in faith that allows us to stand before God in peace and live with him forever. What a blessing that God sends people into our lives to share his word with us. Through these people and the message, they have shared God brought us to faith, strengthens us in faith and guides us on the path that leads to life. Today God asks us to think about our response to the blessings he brings to us through the word that his messengers bring to us. God guides and equips us for eternity and for service in his kingdom through the leaders he sends to teach his Word. Recognizing this blessing from God, we want to respond to their work in joy and gladness by listening to them and following what they say. In the end, what they say are not their words, They are God's Words. Peace is not what the Christians in our text were experiencing when this letter was written. The recipients of this letter were most likely Hebrew or Jewish Christians based in Rome. While they had not yet experienced physical or violent persecution, they were facing some tremendous challenges to their faith. They were not only ridiculed by the Romans for their beliefs, they were also mocked by their fellow Jews for putting their faith in Jesus. Many were tempted to hide their faith to avoid persecution and no doubt some already had. Others were even considering giving up their faith to go back to their former way of life simply to avoid the hassle and trouble. This entire book was written to help these Christians keep their eyes fixed on Jesus so they could stand firm and persevere in these troubles. In Chapter 11, the author had reminded them about all their forefathers, the great heroes of faith. All these heroes, men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, faced tremendous challenges and opposition in their efforts to follow God. Yet all of them with God's help persevered and held firm to the end. With that in mind, the author now encourages them to remember the people in their lives who had shared God's word with them. While the heroes of faith in chapter 11 were not personally known to these Christians, the leaders who had shared God's word with them were. They could more readily identify with these leaders. They were influential people God had sent into their lives to share his word with them. Maybe it was their parents. Maybe their elders. Maybe they were leaders of the group that had a big influence over them. Once they identified these people, the author went further in his encouragement: "Consider the outcome of their way of life." This is

more than just saying, “think about how their life went.” He urged the readers to think about the final outcome of their life. As they carefully scanned the faithful life and fearless death of their past leaders, the weaker Christians would be encouraged and wandering Christians would be warned. Whether their death had come from martyrdom or natural causes, their falling asleep in Jesus provided inspiration for all, especially for those facing violence and persecution. With that in mind, they were further urged, “Imitate their faith.” These leaders had been faithful and true to Christ right up to the end. None had weakened or wavered in their faith as these Christians were being tempted to do. They persevered, held strong and received the promised reward of life in heaven. These leaders may be gone, but what they taught and believed remained eternally the same. The leaders might change, but the message of Christ does not. What he did for those believers in the past he would do for believers in the present. The winds of time may shift the sands of the earth, but they leave the eternal Savior untouched. He is the same always. He never changes in the way he takes care of his people and looks after them. Believers of any century have but one ground for their faith and one goal for their life—Jesus Christ. This is why the writer could urge the believers to submit to their leaders now in the present and obey what they have to say. Those spiritual leaders who remained true teachers of God’s word and staunch confessors of Christ were deserving of such obedience and submission. They were God’s gift through which God brought the blessings of peace with him and through whom he equipped them for service in his kingdom. As God’s messengers, they brought not their words but God’s words. They didn’t come with their own personal agendas or hopes for glory. They weren’t guiding the people in a way that would prop themselves up. They were only God’s messengers seeking to share the message of peace with God through Jesus. God was masking himself in these leaders to bless the people with the certain promise of heaven and the guidance and direction they needed to remain on the path which leads to life. These believers weren’t submitting to the leaders by listening and following their message, they were submitting to God because these were God’s words. In our world today, many people don’t show much respect toward leadership. Maybe that’s because so many leaders in the past have failed to demonstrate proper guidance. Americans are very critical of their government leaders because they make big and grand promises that are seldom kept. People rebel against teachers, principals and parents because they don’t like others giving them guidance and direction. They

want to do their own thing. Many times people even feel that way toward bosses and employers and managers. So it may be hard for us to hear this message from God's word today: "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority." Let's remember first of all that all people in authority over us are God's representatives that he sends to bring blessings to us—even if they fail us at times or operate in ways that are different than we would operate. Second, let's remember the added blessing God brings through those leaders who share God's word with us—they are bringing us God's word! We want to listen to them, imitate them, pray for them and follow them because they are guiding us with the words God himself gave to them. When your pastor stands before you and shares with you those things that God says in his word, it is really as if God himself were standing here sharing those words with you. No, I am not calling your pastor God nor comparing him to God in any way. But your pastor has the privilege of revealing to you those things God himself has said. Therefore, his words aren't really his words. They are God's words. That puts a huge responsibility on the shoulders of your pastor. This passage reminds pastors that one day we will have to stand before God to give account for the way that we shepherded his people as his representatives. This reminds us of the awesome responsibility that God gives to us to properly proclaim his word. Please know that we pastors take that responsibility seriously. When we speak about sin, it is not because we enjoy making you feel bad or want to control your life. When we speak about death it's not because we want to be heavy handed or rule you with fear. We share that because this is what God himself has said. God sets the rules for what is sin and what is not sin. This isn't for us to change. We couldn't even if we wanted to. God also is the one who set death as the wages we deserve to pay for the sin we commit. These are his words! We share these words with you simply to help you be aware of your sin and what you deserve for your sin so that you can turn to Jesus to see and believe the solution that he has provided for you. When we share with you the forgiveness you have for your sins in Jesus, it's not that we're trying to circumvent the system to make things easier for you—this is what God himself says. When we share with you that in Jesus, because of his life, death and resurrection, heaven is open and waiting for you, we're not making you a promise we can't deliver—this is what God himself has said. When we tell you that no matter how big the sin, no matter how many you have committed, no matter how long you've been doing it, Jesus died to pay the price that you deserve so you can

go to heaven, it's not that we're offering some sort of wish or false hope—we are simply relating to you what God himself has said. These are God's words. Listen to them, take them to heart and put your trust in them not because we said them but because God himself has said them. These are God's words. Think about the peace you have with God knowing that these are his words! It's not that we are telling you God might forgive you or you have a good chance of being in heaven. This is God himself saying to you when you confess your sins he forgives them in Jesus. This is God saying whoever believes in me will live with me forever. Through Jesus, you are right with almighty God. You have the peace of sins forgiven and the confidence of eternal that God himself has given you. Believe it when we share this message with you not because of us, but because these are God's own words! It's the same thing when we share with you the message from God to now go out as redeemed children of God and honor him by using your time, your talents and your treasures to carry out his work. We don't encourage you to give of your money in offerings so that we can build our kingdom. We don't encourage you to use your gifts and talents to serve because we have some big agenda that we want to see done and added to our resume. We don't urge you to give of your time to serve others so that we can put a feather in our own caps. These are God's words. This is what God wants of you. We don't share these words with you for our benefit. We share them with you because we want nothing more for you than to honor God by following his will and desire for you. We want nothing more than to serve you by guiding you into how you can say thanks to God for all that he has done for you in Jesus and to bring him glory and praise as you live out your life as his child and carry on the mission he has given to all of us to be his witnesses in our world. God masks himself in the people of this world to bring his blessings to you. While God wants you to honor all in authority, be especially thankful for those whom he sends into your life to share his word with you. Honor them. Listen to them. Respond to their message by following their guidance. Trust their words and find your peace with them. They come to you not for their benefit or good but yours. They come to you to share with you not their words. But God's. Respond in thanks to him because in the end, These are God's Words. Amen.